



THOMAS MILLS HIGH SCHOOL

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Dear Parents

31st December 2020

Headteacher's Update 2020/2021 – Letter 13 (of 13)

I very much hope that you and your families have been able to enjoy some form of break over the past two weeks. With the rise of new cases locally and beyond, the identification of a new variant, as well as Government announcements yesterday, you will not be surprised that I am writing to you on New Year's Eve.

This letter is for all members of our school community. Earlier today I met with the Senior Team and some Governors, following the Prime Ministerial and Ministerial Briefings yesterday, as well as the media speculation which had been growing all week about the safe re-opening of schools. However, we based our discussion on the Department for Education's communication which I received last night. This communication has some important implications for our start of term.

(1) Changes to the Re-opening of Schools in January 2021

Following on from the Secretary of State's announcement, the Government has confirmed that it is extending the staggered return of students to secondary schools. Essentially this is because of the increases in case rates and to give schools more time for the rollout of testing so that we can make it "as safe as possible to return to face-to-face education."

I think the key messages from the announcement are:

- Year 11, Year 13 and Year 12 BTec students will no longer return to school on Tuesday 5th January.
- All year groups will have remote learning for the first week (in our case, via Teams).
- Children of critical workers and vulnerable children can attend school.
- Year 11, Year 13 and Year 12 BTec students will now return from Monday 11th January 2021.
- All other year groups will return to secondary schools by Monday 18th January 2021.
- Vocational exams scheduled from the first week of January will go ahead as planned.

(2) School Provision for Children of Critical Workers and Vulnerable Children

Further details about these groups can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>

Firstly, if you require this provision, it would be helpful if you could email the school (via the 'inmail' address) by Monday 4th January. It would be helpful in the case of children of critical workers if you could let us know the occupation so we can cross-reference this with the criteria.

Initially, as advised in my last letter, the children will follow their usual timetable. However, our provision and operating procedures may need to evolve in the light of student and even staff numbers. Although Suffolk County Council have not confirmed this, I don't envisage any changes to transport given the partial school shut down is only one to two weeks.



(3) Remote Learning

As mentioned earlier, this will be via Microsoft Teams. The Department for Education has said that we should “prioritise resources for remote education for exam year groups.” It maybe that Subject Departments set work for some year groups for the week beginning Tuesday 5th January. However, the Government has suggested that from the 11th January “remote education will be provided to all pupils this week prior to return to school...”

Obviously, this ambiguity is not helpful, and it would be my preference that there is increasing interactivity in the learning within the first week. However, in the early stages I would be supportive of Subject Departments working collaboratively so that at the very least, suitable work is set. Teachers will, this time, have to balance online work with possible face to face work. This is another new challenge, but we will seek to respond to this positively.

(4) School Calendar – January 2021

At the moment, we plan to go ahead with the Parents Evenings (which are, of course, now online). There may be adjustments following the Year 13 Parents Evening on Thursday 7th January, but the Sixth Form Team will be in touch anyway before the Year 12 Parents Evening scheduled for Thursday 21st January.

We are planning for Year 11 Prep Examinations to go ahead as scheduled. However, there may have to be some adjustments to the timetable to accommodate the rollout of testing.

Clearly, all events are subject to change, but we will advise you accordingly.

(5) Coronavirus Testing

Mr Wheeler, Deputy Headteacher and Mr Mugliston, Business Manager, will be overseeing this important but new task.

It is expected that our testing kits will be delivered on Monday 4th January. Senior colleagues have been working through the Guidance. I envisage writing to you next week with more details including an information guide and consent forms.

We will need to increase our capacity and would welcome suitable volunteers from the community. Given that there will be supervision and training, a key-criteria will be availability as well as being suitable to work with children (we will, of course, undertake safer recruitment checks). If you are interested, please could you email both my colleagues below:

mmugliston@thomasmills.suffolk.sch.uk

mwheeler@thomasmills.suffolk.sch.uk

(6) Primary Schools

Please be aware that all the arrangements above refer to secondary schools and there are key differences for Primary Schools as well as different areas of the country.

Summary

I am hopeful that our continued resolve will see us move ahead safely in the next few months. There are likely to be national and possibly even local changes to deal with. Unfortunately, the risk with last minute announcements is that effective planning is delayed and both the quality of our safety measures as well as the quality of education could be compromised. I can assure you that we will continue to weigh everything up carefully and keep you updated. We all want to see a quality education which is, in the current circumstances, as safe as possible.

I am sure that families are also thinking through contingencies in the light of various ‘what ifs’ which could emerge in the weeks and months ahead.

Although I know that many families have faced challenges over the ‘holiday’ and to them I offer my sincerest thoughts, given the time of my writing, I do feel that I should wish you a Happy New Year. I am hopeful that it will be, although we will all need to work together, with kindness, to ensure that it is.

Yours sincerely



P J Hurst
Headteacher