



# THOMAS MILLS HIGH SCHOOL

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Dear Parents

5<sup>th</sup> January 2021

## **Headteacher's Update 2020/2021 – Letter 14 (of 14)**

As always, I hope this letter finds you well.

Many of us returned to the school setting yesterday and it was clear that many more families, including amongst our pupils and staff, had tested positive for coronavirus and are therefore self-isolating. We all very much hope that the effect is mild, and a speedy recovery is made.

From our point of view, the national and local context is very different this time from any previous point in this crisis. At the weekend, the Prime Minister claimed that schools are safe but clearly, from last night's announcement, it is safer for the majority of the population to be at home thus limiting social contact. The NHS is experiencing intense pressure and so the country has entered a third national lockdown.

In this letter I want to provide you with the key headlines that I received from the Department of Education very late last night as well as to update you on related areas. I will almost certainly be writing to you again in the weeks ahead.

## **Essential Information from the Department of Education**

- The Prime Minister has announced a new national lockdown will come into force at 00:01 on Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> January
- Schools will remain open to vulnerable children and the children of critical workers only
- Public vocational exams and assessments scheduled to take place in January will go ahead as planned
- All other students will learn remotely until February half term
- The Government does not think it is possible for exams to go ahead fairly this summer. The Secretary of State for Education will be asking Ofqual to consult rapidly on an approach for alternative arrangements that “will allow students to progress fairly.”
- The Government acknowledges that receiving face to face education is best for children's mental health and for their educational achievement
- The decision does not suggest that schools are no longer safe places for young people. “Instead, limiting attendance is about reducing the number of contacts that all of us have with people in other households.”
- The system of protective measures means that risks (in school) are well managed and controlled
- The new variant (of coronavirus) affects all ages but “we have not seen any changes in the severity among any age groups including children and young people.”
- The coronavirus testing programme should be continued to enable weekly testing for staff and daily close contact testing for those staff and pupils. The programme also allows schools to test pupils on return



## My Response

I am not surprised with this outcome. Speculation about the re-opening of schools had started mid-way through December. Towards the end of the holiday, as you know, I had to consider how best to balance safety against the quality of education.

Earlier I mentioned about the known cases associated with the school. Had this situation appeared in December, I think we would have had significant numbers self-isolating and because of staff availability, may have had to keep year groups at home. To be fair to the Department for Education, the staggered return for secondaries had given us some breathing space. The main short-term impact of the announcement is for Year 11, Year 12BTec and Year 13 and I shall return to this later.

As we enter our 11<sup>th</sup> month of this crisis, as a school, we have developed a good community approach to the situation and gained experience along the way. We now have the use of Microsoft Teams and whilst remote learning is not ideal for many reasons, it is at least a useful learning platform. Our remote pastoral links have increased, and this will be even more important this time round.

The support of parents, staff and pupils has been overwhelming and I am confident that we will get through this period with resilience and positivity.

## Outline Risk Assessment for the Start of Term

In addition to our previous documentation, I had started to prepare an outline document which is useful to include some key points as it also provides an update on several items of interest. To some extent the risks and control measures are all connected.

New Identified Risk	Additional Control Measures	Update on Control Measures
<p>The ongoing spread of coronavirus especially the new variant, noting the increase of case rates in Suffolk including the secondary age range</p> <p>A reduction in staff levels making it unsafe to operate the school</p> <p>(A further reduction in staff levels could arise from any of the following: medical absence; shielding; self-isolation; consideration of using Section 44 Employment Rights Act 1996.)</p>	<p>Coronavirus Testing taking place in schools</p> <p>Roll out of a vaccination</p> <p>Reduction of pupils in school (staggered return) and reinforcement of all the system of controls as well as 'hands, face, space.'</p> <p>Consideration of masks in classrooms</p> <p>Possible school closure or some year groups working at home</p> <p>Ensuring adequate supervision for key worker/ vulnerable children</p>	<p>Testing Kits have arrived, and Mr Mugliston and Mr Wheeler will be writing to parents about this</p> <p>The vaccination is being rolled out, but schools should be a higher priority</p> <p>The supervision of key worker/ vulnerable children will be greater this time, building in resilience for possible staff absence and allowing for more groups (supporting social distancing)</p>

Therefore, the Government's recent decision makes it easier to manage the risks, enabling us to focus on the quality of education for a foreseeable period of time.

## **Summer External Examinations – Year 11, Year 13, and Year 12 BTec**

Following on from the Government's announcement, it is vital that these year groups continue with their learning and use all opportunities to provide evidence of their progress. We await to see the detail of the "alternative arrangements" but it would be unwise to speculate solely on the experience of last year.

If these year groups lose the momentum for learning, there will be an impact further down the line. My advice at this point would be to think that the examinations are going ahead and work hard accordingly. We will share details with you – probably through Heads of Year since some aspects around Year 11 Prep Exams as well as the Year 13 Parents Evening are quite specific.

## **Provision for Critical Workers Children and Vulnerable Pupils**

Thank you to all parents who have responded to my request to inform us about possible demand. It has certainly shown us that demand is greater this time and so our provision will be different. In line with evolving Government announcements we made changes yesterday, but we have ensured possible adequate supervision this week by ensuring that Heads of Year and Heads of Department are in school. Mr Wheeler has been in touch with parents who have responded. We have been supportive of all requests which are in line with the set criteria.

There was a change made to the critical worker list yesterday which included new workforces whose work is critical following the end of the EU transition period.

In answer to the common questions which have arisen, I provide some answers:

- For Years 7 to 11, uniform should be worn. This is in line with current Guidance for Re-opening Schools.
- School Transport is as planned. (Suffolk County Council have been very good about keeping us informed about relevant matters.)
- The School Canteen is operational (however I would imagine there will be changes in time because of the decline in income).
- It would always be a good idea to have a reading book.
- The School Behaviour Policy applies.

It is expected that the provision may grow because certain (defined) children who cannot, or do not engage with remote learning, may need to be in school and we expect to be working with statutory agencies.

## **Staff Responsibilities**

The management of the school during this time requires additional management responsibilities and there is a team approach to this:

*Coronavirus Testing* – Mr Mugliston and Mr Wheeler

*Remote Learning* – Mr Wheeler with Mr Ward, Miss Lambert, and Mr Heath (Heads of Department have responsibility for their curriculum areas. Mr Wheeler and Mr Ward will direct policy and provision; Miss Lambert and Mr Heath will lead staff training, seeking to improve on best practice)

*Key Workers/ Vulnerable Children* – Miss Armes with Mr Wheeler and Heads of Year

*Alternative Arrangements to Exams* – Mr Ward and Mr Cann

## **Other Matters**

There are many other matters to deal with in connection with the pandemic. One is the planned ski-trip and I hope to find some time in the next week or two to follow up our correspondence with the company involved. (We have asked for a refund as we are not allowed to go but the company want us to pay for cancellation charges. We may have to enter a dispute and are in touch with other interested parties such as our insurers.)

The collision course that appeared to have been developing between Teaching Unions and the Government caused some concern. I think the debate has been misrepresented. Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act is something quite specific and there are many steps that would need to be taken before this one. It's not an automatic withdrawal of labour as may have been associated with strike action in the distant past.

Our staff are on employment contracts and work with reasonable management instructions. On the other side an employer has to take reasonable steps to provide a safe workplace and a system of work. Our employer is the Thomas Mills Academy Trust and as a stand-alone academy our trustees are actively connected with the school. For many other schools, the employer will be the Local Authority or Multi-Academy Trust.

### **Moving Forward**

At some point, the school will need to consider re-opening. It is my preference to plan ahead and 6 weeks (being optimistic) is no time at all. Although the pattern from the Government appears to be 'last minute' I envisage sharing our ideas with you as well as consulting with staff. We will investigate a staggered return for all year groups. This worked very well in September.

The exact timing of this will depend on the national and local statistics as well as Government announcements. At the moment the rates in Suffolk are too high and it will be sometime before the impact of this new national lockdown is seen. Let's very much hope that this action supports the NHS with its incredible work. The contribution made by all critical workers is essential and in school we are proud to contribute to the effort, albeit in a different way compared to other sectors.

I wish all families the very best at this time. At the end of the Autumn Term, we finished our assemblies with S Club Seven's *Reach*. The lyrics more than ever have relevance:

*Don't believe in all that you've been told*

*The sky's the limit you can reach your goal*

*No one knows just what the future holds*

*There's a whole world at your feet....*

So, as we hold onto our hopes and dreams, I wish you my very best wishes. I will be in touch.

Yours sincerely



P J Hurst  
Headteacher