



THOMAS MILLS HIGH SCHOOL

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Dear Parents

9th December 2020

Headteacher's Update 2020/2021 – Letter 10 (of 10)

As always, I trust this letter finds you well. I had been planning to write to you next week, but wider announcements have forced my hand, to make some decisions and communicate with you today instead. I would have liked more time to consider our response.

Change of End of Term Date to Thursday 17th December 2020

Yesterday, the Department for Education wrote to all schools and two items were entitled 'end of term planning' and another was 'end of term advice for schools.' Subsequently, they must have communicated with the wider media and a different slant has emerged that the school term will end on the 17th. (It has been a busy year and so maybe a lack of clarity is understandable, but it may lead to different schools doing different things.)

To schools, the Department *suggested* that we make **Thursday 17th December**, the last day for pupils. (This is, of course, different to our calendar and we were working towards Friday 18th December. I understand that there had been some discussions with the Department about trying to bring the term to an end this week.)

The Department for Education said to us that, "We recognise this communication has arrived with schools late in the term but would ask schools to be as helpful to parents as they can by sharing any changes to end of term arrangements as soon as possible, particularly where schools choose to make Friday 18th December a non-teaching day. Your support with this is appreciated."

They explain that the reason for this suggestion is that any school involvement with NHS contact tracing can end on the 23rd December and not Christmas Eve. It also seems to link with a preference for Further Education to also finish on Thursday 17th.

I am not particularly happy with the timing of the announcement. I also appreciate that there is potential disruption to parents with regards to childcare. Although teachers can make use of the inset day for future planning, I'm sure the same media sources that announced the early end of term will be the first to highlight that in their eyes, school staff have enough holidays!

If I do not change the date, as *advised*, I think school attendance could be affected and although at this stage in the term there is less teaching, it would be a shame for any pupil to miss our end of term arrangements. We have spoken to some families and they understand the dilemmas but would appreciate the extra day to essentially self-isolate in the run up to the Christmas period.

I therefore propose that this term comes to an end for pupils on Thursday 17th December. The new term for pupils will continue to begin on Tuesday 5th January 2021.

The Department for Education has said that 'teaching time' is to be made up later in the year. We do not interpret this as saying that we will have to take out one of the holiday days later in the year (although it is not clear whether Friday 18th December is to be seen as an *additional* inset day!)



Arrangements in the School Holidays for Positive Coronavirus Cases

The Department for Education say the following:

- Where a pupil or staff member tests positive for coronavirus (COVID-19), having developed symptoms more than 48 hours since being in school, the school should not be contacted. Parents and carers should follow contact tracing instructions provided by NHS Test and Trace.
- For the first 6 days after teaching ends, if a pupil or staff member tests positive for coronavirus (COVID-19), having developed symptoms within 48 hours of being in school, the school is asked to assist in identifying close contacts and advising self-isolation, as the individual may have been infectious whilst in school.
- School staff are not asked to remain on-call or conduct any contact tracing more than 6 days after the final day of teaching. Where a school's last teaching day is on Thursday 17 December, there should be no pupil contact tracing asks beyond Wednesday 23 December.
- Where pupils are required to self-isolate due to contact with a positive case after the first 6 days following the end of term, schools do not need to be informed about their absence until the first day of the new term.

If parents wish to contact us about a positive case, you are welcome to do so and during the holiday you should email both our 'inmail' and 'attendance' email addresses. Please put the subject heading 'Positive Coronavirus Case.' On the first line please make clear the name of your child and their tutor group. The only advantage for us in you doing this is that it alerts us to the possibility that Public Health England may be in touch.

End of Term – Thursday 17th December 2020

We are planning to hold special assemblies during this day, and these will include videoed musical items (including one from the staff) as well as a celebration of award winners.

In the evening, our online Christmas Concert will go live via our You Tube channel. I am sure that you will enjoy this and find it a great way to start the holiday.

We hope that these events will bring the term to a nice and pleasant end.

Exam Measures to Support Students

You may have seen recently that the Secretary of State for Education announced that students sitting exams and assessments next year will benefit from a number of measures which include:

- More generous grading than usual in line with national outcomes from 2020;
- Students receiving notice of some topic areas to focus revision;
- Exam aids such as formula sheets;
- Additional exams for a second chance (if affected by illness or self-isolation);

We are told that more details will be given in the New Year.

Friday 11th December 2020 and 'Christmas Jumper Day'

As you know, we hold other charity events during the year. However, some families have asked if they can wear a Christmas Jumper or suitable alternative jumper on Friday 11th December. I think it seems appropriate to support this. Normal school uniform should be worn but students can wear a different jumper instead. In return, we ask that an item is brought into school for our Food Bank Appeal.

We do not recommend the purchase of a Christmas Jumper specially for this day and donations can always be given directly to the charities concerned. (I will donate, given the absence of a Christmas Jumper in my wardrobe.)

Face Coverings on Dedicated School Travel Routes

It is the law that children and young people aged 11 and over must wear a face covering on public transport. It is also now the case that they must wear a face covering when travelling on dedicated transport to school.

The Friends of Thomas Mills High School

We particularly appreciate the wide support from the Friends of the School. I am grateful for their recent fundraising and purchases (see below). Kathy Carter, their Secretary, has kindly written to us:

In these uncertain times, the Friends have missed supporting the school, with their cheery smiles and welcoming words. We would all like to thank the staff for their sterling work shown, educating, and caring for our loved ones. We are very pleased to say we have funded 10 new picnic benches for the students to use during break and lunch times. Something that the students will be able to use for many years to come.

So here we are, at the end of term, wishing all the staff, students, parents, and guardians a very happy Christmas and every best wish for 2021.

From all the Friends of Thomas Mills High School

Staff Changes

Earlier this term, Judy Fullam retired from the Finance Office after twenty years of dedicated and conscientious service.

We sadly say goodbye to more two members of staff: Lynda Hibberd and Mel Barker-Reid. Lynda's retirement marks the end of an era since she was originally on the staff when Thomas Mills opened in September 1979! Since that time, she has undertaken a number of roles both within as well as beyond the classroom. Lynda has a strong, enthusiastic and engaging presence in the classroom and the staff room and will be very much missed. I know that you will share with me in thanking Lynda for her work and loyalty to the school (which is ultimately the pupils) and to wish her a very happy and pleasant retirement.

Final Thoughts

It's been an extraordinarily challenging year and one that has affected everybody associated with our school and community. Perhaps Charles Dickens in his *Tale of Two Cities* may have captured it as follows:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...

However, I am optimistic that there is wisdom, light and hope on the horizon and that things will move forward quickly in 2021. In the Spring Term we will begin to consider how restrictions in and around school could lift further, leading to more opportunities.

I would like to thank you for your support during these times.

It was, of course, Dickens in *A Christmas Carol* that popularised the phrase 'Merry Christmas' and so may I add to that by wishing you and your families a lovely Christmas and a Happy New Year 2021.

Yours sincerely



P J Hurst
Headteacher