



# THOMAS MILLS HIGH SCHOOL

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Dear Parents

3<sup>rd</sup> October 2023

## Headteacher's Update Letter 2023/2024 – Letter 3 (of 3)

### Open Week and Open Evening

It was a real pleasure welcoming so many families to our school last week, especially on Open Evening itself. The place was positively buzzing and busy. Your lovely children showed so much enthusiasm and pride in their school. Thank you. I was very proud. If you know of anyone who would be interested in a place, they still would be very welcome to visit.

### Communication from Ofqual and Examination Outcomes

Ofqual is the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, and they regulate qualifications, examinations and assessments. They are a non-ministerial government department. With regards to examinations, the school is often known as a 'centre.'

Ofqual have made many announcements this year especially around the return to pre-pandemic grade boundaries. They have recently written to schools and further explained that we should, in effect, disregard any grade boundaries and some past papers that were in use between 2020 and 2022. We should instead use papers taken in and before 2019 and after 2023. Grade boundaries will continue to vary from year to year. There had been considerable leniency between 2020 and 2022 that no longer applies.

There were some excellent examination outcomes this summer and we share our students' celebrations but in spite of increased marks across the centre, grades, overall, were lower. The headline figure of 70% Grades 9-4 in English and Mathematics was encouraging but nevertheless about 4% lower than we would have hoped for. The key explanation is that examination boards had increased the grade boundaries in order to complete the transition to 'pre-pandemic grading.'

These developments mean a few things for us all:

- We have to maximise the marks to be surer of future grades
- It looks like there will be a limit to the number of grades awarded for some levels, such as Grade 9; this again, reaffirms, the importance of maximising marks

With so much course content focussed on knowledge, it is important that students revise regularly, so they can recall knowledge effectively. They must always catch up on work missed, particularly Year 11. Mr Ward, Assistant Head and Miss Ingold, Head of Year, will be writing to you to explain some of this further, as well as the importance of attendance.

In my view, the regulator was always going to need to re-set the boundaries following the centre assessed grades from 2020. It's always important that we have a true understanding of our own achievements and how to progress further, and so this links to our assessment and feedback in the classroom.



It must also be borne in mind that the 'leniency' given between 2020-2022 has not necessarily made things easier for older students. For example, it did make the sitting of future examinations whether at A Level, or even university, more challenging.

Finally, the regulator has published a consultation on 'resilience arrangements' should the country face a similar situation in the future. This will principally focus on school evidence that arises from assessments and mocks.

### **Attendance and achievement**

You will know that school attendance continues to be a national issue. I'm pleased to say that there have been some good improvements here, but we are still 2% at least behind pre-2020 levels. What is clear from our own analysis is that attendance correlates very strongly with achievement. Excellent progress and attainment occurs with students whose attendance is 96% and above. There are a few outliers to this but these are very much the exception. What this means is that students who have over eight days absence a year are more likely to under-achieve.

In conclusion, it is clear that attendance and engagement make a significant difference.

### **Government Guidance on Vapes**

The Government have been strengthening the guidance to schools and in short, are taking a stronger line. We support this and I propose to make a change to our Behaviour Policy. In terms of the Hierarchy of Sanctions we propose to move smoking/vaping, and their possession, to Level 7. This would move the sanction to suspension. It also should be borne in mind that the level of proof is based on 'probability' – is it more likely than not that an incident happened?

The Talk to Frank website provides some information about vapes including the risks. It makes the point that vapes include nicotine and toxins and therefore there is the potential for harm.

### **Neighbours and Road Safety**

With recent housing developments, we have increased our neighbours and school dropping off and picking up times can be busy. Some of our neighbours are understandably worried about the risks of parents turning round in the roads, particularly in the new estate opposite the school.

We politely ask that everyone is mindful of others and safety must be paramount. I'll look to provide my usual safety advice to pedestrians and cyclists later in the month.

### **Student Survey from the Children's Commissioner**

The Children's Commissioner for England has launched The Big Ambition, a national survey of children and young people. They want to hear children's thoughts, opinions and ideas to decision-makers, to make sure that the Government hears young people's voices on what they think needs to be done to make children's lives better in England. The Survey is open until Friday 15<sup>th</sup> December and can be accessed via the following link:

[www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-ambition/](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-ambition/)

### **'Lockdowns' or Invacuation**

My apologies, that in a previous letter I used the term 'lockdown' and some families mistakenly thought this may have referred to the pandemic, which is thankfully behind us all now. In short, a school lockdown is a situation where staff and children must stay still, with the buildings secured. The most likely situation would be an incident within the town where the Police have advised that we all stay still.

In terms of key communication and instruction, we would do the following:

- Ring the bell in short bursts of 9, 3 times. (9,9,9).
- Students should stay in their classroom or if moving, go to the nearest classroom.
- Instructions will be communicated to staff online.

It is rare that schools have to use these kinds of procedures, and I saw one example recently where a school used similar procedures because of a potentially dangerous dog on the loose.

These procedures are sometimes known as invacuation. With regards to our fire evacuation procedures, we recently practised this and the students were exemplary.

### **Summary**

The term is in full swing and there is an energy and positive vibe around the school. There are lots of events to look forward to including The Careers Fayre and Book Week as well as the school production of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang next month.

As ever, thank you for your support. A school is its people and success is dependent on partnership and teamwork.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely



P J Hurst  
Headteacher