



THOMAS MILLS HIGH SCHOOL

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Dear Parents,

23rd May 2024

Important Amendments to GCSE Options – Year Eight into Year Nine 2024/25

As always, thank you for your support and I know that students are looking forward to options and their GCSE studies from September. I am writing to you about some changes we are making to the options going forward into Year Nine. These changes have not been taken lightly but are a response to some outside pressures. To move forward, I am going to discuss the changes we intend to make and then explain the rationale.

Some Principles Behind our Curriculum

Firstly, we have retained the principle that the options can start in Year Nine. This is increasingly unusual in schools, but we have seen many benefits over many years not least the engagement and motivation that comes with choice as well as allowing for some specialisation where there are talents and interests.

What changes are we making for our curriculum options?

Students will be asked to choose their 'free' options again. They will be given three choices and one reserve. The choices already made for languages and humanities should remain. There will be fewer options and we have prioritised on National Curriculum subjects so there is a stronger overlap with both Key Stage Three and Key Stage Four in other schools. Business Studies is popular at both GCSE and in the Sixth Form, and is still an option.

We are likely to retain the idea that students can drop one option subject going into Year Ten.

Timescale and process

Pupils and parents will be issued with the options choices. The five blocks to choose from will be as follows:

- MFL
- Humanities
- Free Choice 1
- Free Choice 2
- Free Choice 3

Details of these choices will be sent to both parents and pupils before half-term by Mr Ward.

In the first week after half-term, pupils will have the opportunity in their form groups to complete the new Options form in an IT room, with a view to all forms being completed by 7th June 2024

What are the advantages of this from a student point of view?

Some students have told us that although they like the choice and starting GCSEs early, the use of restricted choice blocks meant their decision was sometimes the 'least bad option.' This is hardly a promising start to successful GCSE engagement with many students already having a view as to which subjects they would drop



going into Year Ten. This model still enables students to specialise if they want to with the arts or humanities for example.

What's the problem with our curriculum and what has led to these changes?

As most schools are running a standard curriculum in Year Nine this means that they are operating with fewer timetabled lessons and larger class sizes which may be considered more 'efficient.' We have always been mindful of the efficiency argument but deliberately side with effectiveness!

The scrutiny of our funding and spending is from an agency called the Educational Skills and Funding Agency (ESFA). There is much clarity with their frameworks and good guidance. Their analysis shows that our expenditure on teaching staff is in the top 10% of similar schools and our pupil to teacher ratio is in the lowest 20% of similar schools. Although there is no official national policy to increase class sizes, the implication of the analysis will lead to that outcome across the sector, over time.

Furthermore, we pay our teachers with reference to national terms and conditions. The cost of staff is budgeted to increase above 4% next financial year but the funding we have received has only partially covered the cost and the school is expected to fund the short-fall. Some of this short-fall is because grants are calculated to fund the number of teachers they would expect us to have, not what we actually have. In addition, when we receive top up grants we may only receive money for the number of teachers they would expect us to have.

Ultimately, schools and any authority above them have to live within their means. Two years ago we had a visit from a School Resource Management Advisor (SRMA) and he spoke about the difference between what's desirable and what's affordable.

We still believe we can maintain options from Year Nine but will need to work with fewer groups.

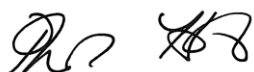
Summary

It is never our preference to make these changes at this point. However, we will need to demonstrate to the government that we are living within our means, and we think we can show that. I think many parents will welcome the changes. However, for those students that found it hard to choose and wanted to 'test' some other subjects, they may be disappointed. I hope though that returning to free options is a good balance. Mr Ward and Miss Preston will explain the changes to students in assembly.

In the meantime, we will continue to use all channels to ensure that increase in school costs are supported by government funding.

Thank you for your support,

Yours sincerely,



P J Hurst
Headteacher