

# BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



To: Principals and Headmasters  
All Boston Public Schools

From: Carol R. Johnson, Superintendent  
Richard Stutman, President, Boston Teachers Union

Re: Discovery Schools Application Process

Date: March 20, 2008

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In 1994, the Boston Teachers Union and Boston Public Schools negotiated what was then a new concept of alternative schools, called Pilot Schools. Pilot Schools were created to give school communities greater flexibility and freedoms that were disallowed at the time. Specifically, Pilot Schools were to be permitted to function with “greatly increased decision-making authority, including exemption from all Union and most School Committee work rules.” As laboratories of innovation, Pilots were expected to lead the way toward promoting and disseminating best practices so that all schools would benefit from the Pilot School experience. As a step in the promulgation of best practices, the BTU and BPS in 2006 negotiated an amendment to the Pilot School agreement that called for the creation of more Pilot Schools as well as a new type of school, “Discovery Schools.” Simply, a Discovery School is intended to operate as a blend between the flexibility and autonomy available in Pilot Schools and the traditional BPS school. It is our hope that this new hybrid will allow a school to reach its potential of improving student performance for all students.

A Discovery School will emphasize two of the best practices learned from Pilots — budgetary and curriculum/assessment autonomies. Discovery Schools will not seek any other exemptions from either the BPS or the BTU. In other words, Discovery Schools will still operate under the BTU contract, and the negotiated work rules will remain intact in Discovery Schools. While Discovery Schools will not seek to alter the school calendar or school work day, other school models in place, such as Superintendent’s Schools or Expanded Learning Schools, will be allowed to continue. Nothing in this agreement will prohibit a Discovery School, however, from seeking additional funding to explore other waivers, and these other specific alternatives, should they be requested, will be a matter of collective bargaining.

The BTU Contract calls for the creation of Discovery Schools as outlined below.

“There shall be created Discovery Schools, after a jointly-designed process. The BTU, BPE, and the School Department shall create a committee of up to 6 people, evenly distributed, who will design and implement an RFP process. The superintendent shall have veto power over the creation of any particular Discovery School. It is envisioned that this program will be fully operational effective the 2007-8 school year, but nothing herein shall prevent the establishment of a Discovery School prior to that time. Discovery Schools shall be able to apply for the same autonomies, which could include fiscal and curricular autonomies, as pilot schools and their creation shall be a joint collaboration between the BTU, BPE, and the School Department.”

The intent behind the adoption of Discovery Schools is to allow school communities to have selected flexibility with some but not all of the autonomies granted to Pilot Schools and adapt them to their own unique school environment. In particular, it is envisioned that Discovery Schools shall be granted two of the five autonomies granted Pilot Schools: budget and curriculum/assessment.

1. **Budget:** Discovery Schools may choose either to purchase eligible discretionary district services or not to purchase them and instead receive the monetary equivalent of those services.
2. **Curriculum and Assessment:** Discovery Schools have freedom to structure their curriculum and assessment practices to best meet students’ learning needs. While acknowledging that all Discovery Schools are responsible for administering all state- and district-required tests<sup>1</sup>, these schools are given the flexibility to determine the school-based curriculum and non-state and federally mandated assessment practices that will best prepare students for state and district assessments. Schools have autonomy from local district curriculum requirements. While students must be taught to meet state standards, Discovery School staff would be allowed to choose the educational materials and how to best present content to students. Additional promotion and graduation requirements may be set by the school, although schools and students must meet the state requirement for earning a diploma.

Discovery Schools must comply with all federal and state laws and regulations and court orders, including those relating to access, students’ opportunity to learn, and the diversity of students, teachers, and other staff. Their operating agreements shall include monitoring provisions and retain for the Superintendent and the School Committee the appropriate level of oversight to ensure the quality of education offered, the protection of the rights and interests of students and staff, and expenditure of public funds in fiscally and educationally sound ways. Discovery Schools identified as Commonwealth Priority Schools by the Massachusetts Department of Education may have specific limitations that must be addressed.

Regarding School/Student Assignment: Discovery Schools also are required to educate a diverse group of students that reflects the population of the school district as a whole. Therefore, Discovery Schools must provide programs and services for students with all disabilities and English Language Learners.

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<sup>1</sup> All Discovery schools are required to administer the MCAS exams, and any district-required standardized/or criterion referenced tests.

Proposals submitted must outline the school's strategy for serving students with various educational needs, as well as plans for marketing and outreach to inform Boston families about the school as an option in the school choice process. Discovery Schools must adhere to the Boston School Committee's student assignment policy. The district will not approve a Discovery School proposal that includes any special admissions procedures for students to be enrolled in the school. Discovery Schools may not require an additional application form, interviews, or other admissions requirements.

Students with disabilities are subject to state and federal laws and regulations. All Boston Public Schools, including Discovery Schools, must adhere to these laws and regulations. All Discovery Schools will participate in the district's Special Education Equitable Distribution (SEED) initiative, which is designed to ensure that programs to educate students with disabilities are distributed equitably throughout the district, including all Discovery and non-Discovery Schools.

English Language Learners are subject to Massachusetts laws and regulations and to the provisions of City of Boston's voluntary LAU Agreement. All Discovery Schools are required to adhere to these laws, regulations, and agreements. The Director of the Office of Language Learning and Support Services is available at the central office to assist in all issues related to English Language Learners.

### **Why Discovery Schools**

For many school communities, Discovery Schools will present an opportunity to take advantage of certain autonomies and flexibility viewed as contributing to school improvement. With these autonomies will come an ability to do things differently and to try new approaches — all with the hope of improving our schools and eliminating the gaps that exist in students' performance.

**Autonomy in curriculum and assessment** will allow school staff to improve upon the delivery of educational services. Staff will be able to propose new curriculum designs, new methodologies and new ideas, hoping to be better able to stimulate learning. While not exempt from state-mandated testing and assessments, schools will be able to tailor their curriculum and assessment practices to their particular needs. **Budget autonomy** will allow schools to capture some of their per capita resources and use them differently to suit the needs of the particular school.

It is hoped that the configuration of Discovery Schools with the above-granted autonomies will allow schools to explore new ways of doing things while maintaining specific elements of the collective bargaining agreement that have been of concern to some school faculty. We want to encourage the school community and staff to work together to create and explore new ways to accelerate learning.

### **Process for Application**

On March 31, 2008, the BPS and BTU will co-sponsor an information session for schools interested in Discovery Schools status. A more detailed application will be available shortly after that session.

By April 18, 2008, all schools interested in this model must send in a letter of interest signed by the School Site Council, the BTU building representative, and the Principal/Headmaster. The statement must include answers to the following questions. The statement does not commit the school to applying, but simply indicates interest.

1. Why do you want to become a Discovery School?

2. What do you want to do differently? Why will the Discovery model help you? How?
3. What do you hope to accomplish under this model?
4. Describe the support for this model from the community.
5. Define what assessments will be used.
6. Describe your school governance and decision-making model.

Please send copies of your letters to:

Superintendent's Office, Attn: Anand Vaishnav, Boston Public Schools, 26 Court St., 7<sup>th</sup> Floor, Boston, MA 02108

Richard Stutman, President, Boston Teachers Union, 180 Mount Vernon St., Dorchester, MA 02125

### **Timeline**

- March 31: Information session on Discovery Schools at BTU Offices, 180 Mount Vernon St., Dorchester. (Please also see the list of Frequently Asked Questions at the end of this memorandum.)
- April 18: Letter of intent due
- April, May, June: Schools complete Discovery Schools application
- June 30: Discovery Schools application due to Superintendent's Office and BTU

Thank you for your interest in the Discovery Schools concept. We look forward to seeing you at the March 31 information session.

# Frequently Asked Questions: Discovery Schools

## ***What is the purpose of Discovery Schools?***

Created as part of the Pilot School agreement, Discovery Schools are intended to be schools that take advantage of some of the best autonomies of the Pilot Schools without changing the overarching contractual language that defines traditional schools. Discovery Schools will be able to enjoy a measure of curricular autonomy similar to that enjoyed by Pilot Schools and potentially, certain budget autonomies such as buy-back provisions. Discovery Schools will still need to teach the same standards as all other schools, both traditional and Pilot, but they will have autonomy to create their own curriculum, methodologies, and assessments. Discovery Schools, just like Pilot Schools, must still administer MCAS and other required assessments and, like all BPS schools, must meet all state and federal requirements and regulations.

## ***What's in it for teachers? What's in it for Principals/Headmasters?***

For teachers, Discovery Schools offer a chance to do things differently, to teach more creatively. Many teachers will enjoy the chance to work on new ideas as part of a team devoted to improving the educational services for their students. Principals and Headmasters will benefit from having an engaged teaching force that initiates new ideas and has the power to implement them.

## ***What's the time commitment required of teachers? Of Principals/Headmasters?***

None is specified, but it is expected that teacher teams will work together to develop an academic program they wish to implement. Obviously this will take time, energy, and commitment — all of which will be time well spent as staff venture on a new course of curricular autonomy.

## ***What kinds of support can we expect from the BTU, BPE and BPS?***

The BTU and the BPS have agreed to a fund of \$30,000 to help the Discovery Schools get started. In addition, it is expected that teachers in schools that are applying will take advantage of the Professional Learning Opportunity grants to help lead the work in their schools. BPE will help launch and support a network of Discovery Schools so that they can learn from each other.

## ***What specific flexibilities will schools get as part of the Discovery School designation?***

Discovery Schools could receive flexibilities in the areas of budget and curriculum/assessment. The way in which these flexibilities are offered is modeled closely after the way in which pilots implement these two autonomies.

## ***Will Discovery Schools have access to both of the aforementioned autonomies, or only that which is applicable to the projects that schools propose?***

Schools are eligible to apply for either of the autonomies. They are not required to request both. Hence, if a school is only interested in applying for curricular autonomy without budget, that is fine.

## ***Does a school give up contractual rights of its members to become a Discovery School?***

No. BTU members' rights are not affected by the conveyance of Discovery School status.

***If a school wants to change its school calendar, or the length of the school day, would teachers get paid for the extra time?***

Discovery Schools will not offer teachers overtime pay. If a school staff wants to extend the work year, or is seeking overall calendar autonomy, they would need to seek Pilot School status. Notwithstanding this, a Discovery School can apply for a Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time grant if it so chooses. In that case, negotiated BTU contract language would apply.

***Do teachers' benefits change if they work in a Discovery School?***

There is no change in contractual rights or monetary benefits if teachers work in a Discovery School. The benefit for teachers in a Discovery School is that they will have greater flexibility than teachers in a traditional school.

***Does a school faculty have to vote on the Discovery Schools Proposal?***

No, but a proposal must have consensus from affected staff and the support of the school leader.

***How will schools be selected?***

The BTU, BPE and BPS will establish a committee that is responsible for implementing a RFP process. All applications will be reviewed by this committee with the understanding that the Superintendent has veto power over the creation of any particular Discovery School.

***What criteria will be used to select schools?***

Selected schools will demonstrate in their proposal commitment, innovation, and accountability. We are interested in schools that will propose to do things differently, will lay out the methodology to do so, and will be willing to be held accountable for the freedom they seek. Schools must show that there is a consensus of affected teachers in support of the project, and that the school leader is in support of the work.

***Which schools are eligible to apply?***

All Boston Public Schools (grades K-12) are eligible to apply for Discovery School status.

***What will happen to schools that aren't selected?***

Schools not selected will be eligible to apply for Discovery status the following year, and we will work with them to support them in a planning year.

***How long will schools maintain their Discovery School status?***

Schools will maintain Discovery School status, and the ability to capitalize on their approved autonomies, as long as the work they develop is successful.

***How will selected Discovery Schools be evaluated? Are there specific accountability measures that will be used in the evaluative process?***

Discovery Schools will be evaluated based on the self-identified performance and outcome measures articulated in each school's original proposal. In addition to a clear definition of a "problem of practice," schools will be asked to identify specific outcomes that the faculty is willing to be responsible for – both for adults' practice and for students' learning. These should be specific, measurable, and have a clear connection to the proposed changes the school wants to initiate.