

# Frequently Asked Questions: *Discovery Schools*

## April 13, 2008

### ***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 and protections that define traditional schools. Discovery Schools will be able to enjoy a measure of curricular/assessment 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.

### ***Can all schools become a Discovery School?***

No, schools; will have to fill out a letter of interest, and then an application. The applications will be review, then approved through a competitive process. To be awarded Discovery status, schools will have to demonstrate what they want to do differently, how these changes will make a difference, and how they intend to assess their growth.

### ***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 a more 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 or mandated, 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/assessment 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. Other funding (grant) sources will be solicited, but additional funds are not guaranteed. The schools will decide how to spend whatever share of the \$30,000 they receive.

***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. With respect to curricula/assessment, autonomy, the flexibilities will be identical. In the area of budget autonomy, like Pilot Schools, Discovery Schools will be able to 'buy back' certain central office services. But unlike Pilots in the area of budgetary autonomy, Discovery Schools will NOT be able to 'save' the salary differential between a high-salaried teacher (or Para) and a lower-salaried teacher (or Para). Our reason for this distinction: We do not want Discovery Schools to make programmatic or personnel decisions based on how much a teacher or a paraprofessional costs.

***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/assessment 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 negatively 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 and those who agreed to work the extended day would get compensation for their time in accordance with the contractual agreement reached in the other ELT schools previously.

***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, the support of the school leader, the ILT, and the School Site Council.

### ***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.

### ***Can a School Decision to become a Discovery School be changed?***

Yes, unlike a conversion to a Pilot School, a Discovery school can 'un-do' its decision and change back to a traditional school.

### ***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.

### **How did the Discovery School meeting go at the BTU on 3/31?**

On Monday, 3/31, we held a meeting at the BTU to go over the *ins and outs* of becoming a Discovery School. Over 100 teachers and staff from 32 different schools attended this event, which was co-hosted by the BTU and Superintendent Carol Johnson. The meeting lasted two hours and contained much give and take. Teachers for their part seemed most interested in curriculum/assessment autonomy. Administrators for their part seemed most interested in budgetary autonomy. Either way, there was enthusiasm all around

### ***What about the process? How does a school apply for Discovery status?***

A letter of interest is due by April 18<sup>th</sup>, although the deadline is fluid. All schools that submit a letter of interest will be asked to complete an application. Copies of the letter of interest should be sent to the BTU president and the superintendent.

### ***Can a Discovery school attempt to attract students citywide and increase their numbers***

In and of itself, Discovery status will not allow any school privileges on student assignment. However, the school department will take a look at the student assignment process and its capacity limitations regarding any particular school, Discovery, Pilot or otherwise.

### ***Can a school allocate money to purchase different texts from citywide adoption?***

In a case where a Discovery school has ordered school department-generated textbooks in advance, it *may be* possible to avoid participating in that textbook ordering program prospectively; the matter will be considered on an individual basis

### ***Where does \$ for PD come from if using different model than what BPS is doing?***

PD is an area in which a Discovery School will have discretion. In other words, a Discovery School will be allowed to purchase this service independently.

### ***Can a school change its walk zone?***

Again, student assignments must be seen as part of a whole picture, and no school, Discovery or Pilot, will be afforded special status, including the imposition of a student screening or application process.

### ***Would money from foundations be acceptable?***

Discovery Schools will be allowed to apply for outside grants.

***How would goals and evaluation be decided?***

Discovery Schools will develop their own goals and evaluation instruments by which they wish to be measure.

***How does school decide to become a Discovery School – could it be a section of a larger school?***

Yes, provided there is a consensus from the affected staff, the principal, the ILT, and the School Site Council

***If schools have received Pilot Planning money from Boston Foundation can the school use/keep it and still opt to become a Discovery School instead?***

Yes. Taking the money from the Boston Foundation does not obligate you to become a Pilot.

***Can school change hours and what about bus schedule?***

We assume you mean, Can a school shift its hours?. Yes, provided there's no impact on another school, and also provided there is no budgetary impact. Same answer for the bus schedule question.

***Is this a one-time application process?***

No, there will be a revolving application cycle.