



Parent Update - Tuesday 14th 2016

Welcome to the Discovery Multi Academy Trust Update. Below are some answers to the latest questions the MAT has received - we hope you find them useful. Staff and parent meetings about the Discovery Multi Academy Trust have taken place in all three schools, as well as a meeting with trade unions just before half term.

Response to Parent Questions

Academies are not bound by the National Curriculum to the same extent. Are there plans already to deviate from the National Curriculum? Are there areas that you already know will have more or less emphasis in the Academy?

The MAT will continue to teach the National Curriculum in order that our pupils are able to access a wide and varied curriculum. This will also ensure that the teaching will prepare them for their end of Key Stage statutory assessments.

Some academies (particularly secondary schools) specialise e.g. “Sports Academy”, “Science Academy” etc. Does this happen with primary schools? If so, will the MAT go down this route, and in what direction?

There is no intention to specialise the MAT in any particular area.

Are academies bound by the same rules with regards to term time absence for pupils, or is more flexibility possible on a case-by-case basis (as in the “old days”)? This is especially pertinent following the recent High Court ruling in favour of a parent who refused to pay the Local Authority fine, on the basis that in law, the term “must attend school regularly” was too vague.

The laws and regulations around attendance are the same for both Local Authority-controlled schools and Academies. The attendance procedures will therefore not be expected to change. The case that you cite is currently being reviewed by Local Government and we will have more clarity with regard to this ruling in due course.

The Discovery Newsletter dated 19th May has updated term times for 2016/17. The proposed non-pupil days are now different to the ones Oakwood had previously firmly announced and would’ve gone into diaries. Most are not an issue other than the fact that the Summer Term 2017 now ends on a Monday (24th July) rather than the previously announced Friday (21st July) - highly undesirable with regards to booking holidays. What reasoning went into this change and is there any chance it could be reverted back to Friday 21st July? (otherwise I would anticipate numerous illnesses on that Monday..!)

Term dates for the three schools were agreed by the Board of Governors some time in advance, and these were agreed before the MAT process began. Non Pupil Days are used for staff training and school procedures, and as a new organisation, this will be of particular importance for all three schools this year. The schools will do what they can to work with parents in supporting this.

As the academy is state-funded, will there be any extra financial stress placed on parents?

There will be no changes to the charges and remissions policies in the schools, and parents will not be expected to contribute to the day-to-day running of the school.

Will parents be selected only from existing governors to sit on the Board?

Initially, the Board has been selected from existing members of the school governing bodies. This will be reviewed when the governors reach the end of their term of office. There is a large majority of parents on the Board, and this is a reflection of the MAT's commitment to parents and the community.

I am worried about cost-cutting. What is the potential impact of this on products and services?

There is no need for any significant cost-cutting, as all three schools are in a comfortable financial position. Economies of scale can be achieved through bulk purchases, and has helped the Federation in the past to reduce costs naturally. We anticipate that any savings we make will then be passed on to the children to enrich their learning experiences further.

Will there be equality between existing and new staff in their pay and terms of conditions?

All existing and new staff are being employed on the same basis as they are currently.

How much control will staff have in deciding new systems and procedures?

Staff will be involved in the day-to-day running of the school in the same way as they do currently.

If no decision has been made yet as to whether we are to become a MAT, why are we able to buy uniform?

We have made arrangements to ensure that uniform is ready, should we pursue our aim to become a MAT. Lead times at manufacturers mean that these things need to be organised as soon as possible and the schools have agreed that either the new or old uniform can be worn from September.

Why is the Federation forming a MAT with Weston Mill? It is quite far away. Did you look at schools in the local area?

The Federation wanted to work with like-minded schools that share the same ethos. Schools in the local area were approached but it was felt that it would not be the best option for our schools.

Practically, how is it going to be possible to share resources when Weston Mill is so far away from the Federation?

This is something that will be developed over time and will be a result of careful planning by the MAT. We will be learning from each other and developing our schools to provide better opportunities for our children. For example, Weston Mill has participated in the Junior Ten Tors challenge for a number of years. This year, Oakwood will be participating for the first time.

How many people will be on the Local Advisory Board?

This has not been defined yet. The role of this Board is more school-centered and the schools will be looking for people who are keen to be involved and can commit time to monitoring and evaluating the schools' practice.

What about the future? Will we work with failing schools?

We may be asked to support failing schools, but we want to establish ourselves as a MAT initially and ensure stability and improvements for our children across the three sites first.

Could a primary school work with a secondary school?

Yes. Some schools do, but that is not something which would work for us currently.

What are the disadvantages of becoming an academy?

Change in any organisation can be difficult for some people. Managing the team and ensuring the careful support of those anxious about change is a priority for us.

What would happen if one of the schools was underperforming? Would any of the other schools suffer?

Good practice will be shared across all of the schools to ensure that support is in place and areas of development are addressed as soon as they arise. Staff wouldn't necessarily be moved to support this.

Will you have to increase class sizes to get more money for the schools?

No, we have set planned admission numbers.

What was the process and criteria for selecting the CEO? Were there many potential candidates put forward?

There was an appointment process with Federation and Weston Mill governing bodies, and advice was sought from representatives from the LA. Federation Governors investigated potential partner schools and CEOs, and decided Weston Mill and Alison Nettleship was the right choice. It was a democratic voting process at governor level.

There seems to be a high proportion of Weston Mill-related people on the Board—more than the one third you might expect for three schools. What processes will be in place to ensure a balanced governance?

The role of the Board is to ensure the best outcomes for all children in the multi academy trust. This is defined in the Articles of Association and Board Members may be asked to step down if they do not fulfil this aspect of their role. There has always been a higher proportion of Oakwood parents on the Federation Board of Governors, and this had not disadvantaged the children in any way.

Are we on course for a 1st September conversion?

Yes.

Can we have the PowerPoint from the presentation put up on the school website?

Yes, this will be made available on each school website once consultations are completed.

Will the MAT have to support a failing school at some point? Will the MAT be forced into this position?

Lots of MATs do support failing schools. We won't initially. The government cannot force a MAT to become the sponsor of a failing school; the MAT would have to apply to become a sponsor in the first place. Then, the DfE would approach the MAT with the proposal, before the MAT says yes or no.

Is there a limit to the number of schools in a MAT?

There are some MATs in the country with 80 to 90 schools in them. We intend the Discovery MAT to stay small, to enable us to retain our individual identity as schools, and value what we have. All three schools have existing partnerships with other schools and organisations in the city, such as City College, Babcock, and several primary schools. We do not intend for these partnerships to end, but for the MAT structure to enable us to enhance them.

Will breakfast clubs change?

Breakfast club arrangements will stay exactly the same as they are at present. Arrangements develop over time, to suit demand.

Will Weston Mill have an after-school club?

Historically, there has been no demand for after-school club at Weston Mill. Should the need arise, it would certainly be looked into. We would need to register with OFSTED as an after-school care provider.

For school trips, would the same policies and procedures for risk assessments etc remain in place?

Yes. In addition, the responsibilities that are currently held with the Local Authority would transfer to the MAT.

Would Free School Meals arrangements stay the same?

Yes.

When will uniform be available to buy?

For Weston Mill parents, uniform is now available to buy from Tesco's UES School Uniform Service: www.tesco.com/ues

For the Federation, uniform orders can be placed with the admin team as normal. It is fine for all children to wear existing uniform for as long as is convenient.

Will there be any conflict of staff because of different contracts?

No. All existing staff are being transferred over on exactly the same terms and conditions that they have now. For new MAT staff members, employed from 1st September 2016, their contracts will also adhere to exactly the same terms and conditions.

Could the MAT sell off any of its assets? E.g. playing field space

Under the Articles of Association, the MAT is not allowed to sell off any assets, unless agreed by the DfE. Any selling of assets must not diminish opportunities for children in any way.

By losing Plymouth City Council Local Authority support, how will the MAT compensate?

The MAT is able to buy services back from Plymouth City Council if it chooses to. Being a MAT also allows us to buy more cost-effective solutions and services. All three schools already buy into external improvement services from the Plymouth Learning Partnership, for HR, Finance etc. This would continue in the MAT.

What is the biggest challenge of the MAT process?

Managing all the change.

Will staff leave if they don't like it?

Staff have had their own consultation process, and have been made aware that day to day, they will notice very little change to their working life. Their contracts **will be** transferred over to the MAT on exactly the same basis as before, and we hope that staff have been able to take comfort in this fact. Early in the process, a review of budgets confirmed that we could convert to a MAT on a like-for-like basis. However, we understand that the process of change is always an unsettling one, and being part of the MAT might not suit everyone.

Where will all funding be coming from?

Currently, the government sends funding to the Local Authority. The Local Authority then top-slices a certain amount of this money for their services,. A funding formula is then applied to allocate funding to schools. Academies receive their funding directly from the government.