Indianapolis Public Schools 2015-16 Frequently Asked Questions: Autonomous Schools

General

1. What are autonomous schools?

Autonomous schools are schools that are granted school-based decision-making authority beyond traditional district-managed schools. These schools have decision-making authority in the following areas:

- instructional methods
- time in instructional day
- content and funding for professional development
- student-based budget allocation

2. What does it mean to become an autonomous school?

Existing district schools have the opportunity to apply to be granted the flexibility to exercise decision-making authority in the areas listed above.

3. Is there a certain number of autonomous schools the district wants to have this year?

Yes, for the 2016-17 cohort, we anticipate selecting 6-8 schools that will receive direct school design planning support as well as access to a budget of actual dollars.

4. Who is in charge of an autonomous school?

An autonomous school remains a part of the district’s corporation, or LEA (Local Education Agency); therefore, the school will still be held ultimately accountable to the IPS Board of Commissioners as it relates to the academic outcomes of the school.

5. What is our relationship with Central Services as an autonomous school?

Autonomous schools enjoy more decision-making authority but will still be managed by an Academic Improvement Officer who will serve as both a thought partner and progress monitor.

6. If we become an autonomous school, what protects us if there is a district leadership or Board of Commissioners transition and new leadership isn’t supportive?

There are no legal protections for autonomous schools; therefore, it is possible that there could be a change in these structures if there were transitions in district leadership or the composition of the Board of Commissioners that were not aligned with our current vision.
Human Resources

7. Who are staff members of an autonomous school employed by?
   All staff members are employed by IPS.

8. What happens to a teacher’s benefits if they work in an autonomous school?
   All employees have access to the benefits packages offered by IPS.

9. Will teachers in autonomous schools be a part of the collective bargaining agreement?
   Yes, they will remain a part of the collective bargaining agreement.

10. Who are principals of autonomous schools accountable to?
    Principals are accountable to the IPS administration and the Board of Commissioners.

Students and Families

1. How do schools engage our students and families about this process?
   We fully believe that engaging your school community regarding this process is critically important; however, it is not our intent to give you specific direction on how to do so as you know your school community best. We believe that the feedback you receive from your school community and your own willingness to engage in this conversation around expanded autonomy with your community are two key factors to consider when assessing your own readiness.

2. Do autonomous schools get to select which students they want, change their grade configuration, or change their boundary areas?
   No.

Academics

1. What will academic goals will autonomous schools be held accountable to?
   We anticipate the 6-5-10 goal framework currently in place to be the metrics that will be monitored and for which schools will be responsible.

2. Can we choose which assessments our students take?
   You are mandated to participate in state-required assessments (i.e. ISTEP); however, you may select the formative assessments you want to employ. As you manage your budget, you would need to ensure there is appropriate funding allocated.
3. **How does Special Education work in an autonomous school?**

   Special Education services must still be provided to students according to their IEPs, and autonomous schools will still be overseen by a compliance monitor. We anticipate staffing allocations will be in place for 2016-17 in the same manner as previous years.

4. **What if our school doesn’t perform well with the autonomies we’ve been granted?**

   This has not yet been determined. District leadership will be working with the Board of Commissioners over the next 2-3 months to determine what steps are taken if an autonomous school is not performing well.

5. **Are there specific minimum requirements around class size, class length, or non-core subjects that we have to meet as an autonomous school?**

   Not at this time; however, we will be bringing recommendations to the Board in order to solicit feedback with the goal being that consensus is reached in December. We will also solicit feedback from a diverse group of principals and teachers prior to recommendations being presented to the Board.

6. **If the goal is that all schools operate under student-based budgeting in the next two years, does that mean all schools will be autonomous once student-based budgeting is in place?**

   No. Operating under student-based budgeting does not mean that schools will automatically have all the other autonomies available. The school leadership team and community must demonstrate both desire and readiness to take on other autonomies. It’s important to note, however, that it’s a priority of the district’s leadership team to ensure that principals and leadership teams are receiving the necessary coaching and development to be ready in the near future.

### Operations and Finance

1. **Will autonomous schools be able to make decisions about the operational services of the district (i.e. transportation, food service, IT, etc.)?**

   No, autonomous schools will not have decision-making authority as it relates to the operations of their schools (i.e. food service, transportation, etc.)

2. **What if we want to change the length of our school day or school year?**

   Autonomous schools may not change the length of the school day or school year.
3. How will funds be directed to an autonomous school under student-based budgeting?

The administration and Board of Commissioners will work during the course of the 2016-17 school year to build out a weighted student formula. This formula would then dictate the funding each school receives. For the 2016-17 pilot group, we anticipate participating schools being given a budget amount that is at least equal to what is needed to operate under their current structures.

4. What support will principals and leadership teams receive in transitioning to student-based budgeting?

District leadership views student-based budgeting as a tool to support academic strategies that have been identified at the school level. Therefore, schools selected for the 2016-17 pilot year will engage in a series of strategic school design planning courses in which they will identify academic priorities for the upcoming school year and receive training in aligning their budgets with those priorities.

5. How will the district deal with the additional fees associated with specific school models (i.e. IB, Montessori, etc.)?

This determination has not been made yet. During the 2016-17 school year, the administration and Board of Commissioners will determine how to address this issue in an equitable manner.

6. How will additional, non-general fund dollars (i.e. Title 1, Capital Projects Fund, etc.) be directed under student-based budgeting?

We anticipate Title I dollars continuing to be directed to schools in the same manner that it was this year (schools received direct funding allocations). For other areas, during the 2016-17 school year, the administration and Board of Commissioners will determine how to address the distribution of other school funding sources in an equitable manner through the weighted formula that is created.

7. How will Special Education dollars be managed under student-based budgeting?

This determination has not been made yet. During the 2016-17 school year, the administration and Board of Commissioners will determine how to address this issue in an equitable manner through the weighted formula that is created, giving very careful consideration to the legal federal and state obligations associated with Special Education funding.
8. **How will teacher pay work in student-based budgeting?**

Teachers will receive their pay as dictated by the collective bargaining agreement. In terms of how salaries will be considered within the budgeting process, this determination has not been made yet.

There are two general avenues to address teacher compensation. The first is for schools to budget based on an average teacher salary across the district. The second choice is to use actual teacher salaries based on the specific staff in each building. During the 2016-17 school year, the administration and Board of Commissioners will determine how to address this issue in an equitable manner.