



## **Spirit of Knowledge Charter School Year Three Site Visit Report**

---

Worcester, MA  
December 2012



This document was prepared by the  
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.  
Commissioner

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, an affirmative action employer, is committed to ensuring that all of its programs and facilities are accessible to all members of the public. We do not discriminate on the basis of age, color, disability, national origin, race, religion, sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

Inquiries regarding the Department's compliance with Title IX and other civil rights laws may be directed to the Human Resources Director, 75 Pleasant St., Malden, MA 02148-4906. Phone: 781-338-6105.

© 2012 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
*Permission is hereby granted to copy any or all parts of this document for non-commercial educational purposes. Please credit the "Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education."*

*This document printed on recycled paper*

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
75 Pleasant Street, Malden, MA 02148-4906  
Phone 781-338-3000 TTY: N.E.T. Relay 800-439-2370  
[www.doe.mass.edu](http://www.doe.mass.edu)



## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| School Profile .....                             | 4  |
| I. Faithfulness to the Terms of the Charter..... | 5  |
| II. Academic Program Success.....                | 7  |
| A. Curriculum .....                              | 7  |
| B. Instruction and Learning.....                 | 8  |
| C. Student Achievement.....                      | 13 |
| III. Organizational Viability .....              | 17 |

## School Profile

| <i>Spirit of Knowledge Charter School (SOKCS)</i> |              |                             |           |
|---|--------------|-----------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Type of Charter</b>                            | Commonwealth | <b>Location</b>             | Worcester |
| <b>Regional/Non-Regional</b>                      | Non-Regional | <b>Districts in Region</b>  | NA        |
| <b>Year Opened</b>                                | 2010         | <b>Current Enrollment</b>   | 176       |
| <b>Maximum Enrollment</b>                         | 275          | <b>Students on Waitlist</b> | 38        |
| <b>Chartered Grade Span</b>                       | 7-12         | <b>Current Grade Span</b>   | 7-11      |

## Mission

“The Spirit of Knowledge Charter School’s 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade Worcester students will create value in their lives and the lives of others through high-standards academic learning, especially in math, science and technology, gaining admission to college, and developing a positive character.”

## Demographics

The school reports the following racial and ethnic composition and percentages of selected populations of the student body as of the date of the site visit:

### Racial and Ethnic Composition and Selected Populations

|                                   | Number of Students | Percentage of Student Body |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
| African American                  | 70                 | 40%                        |
| Asian                             | 5                  | 2.5%                       |
| Hispanic                          | 63                 | 36%                        |
| Native American                   | 5                  | 2.5%                       |
| White                             | 33                 | 19%                        |
| Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander | 0                  | -                          |
| Multi-race, non-Hispanic          | 0                  | -                          |
| Special education                 | 30                 | 17%                        |
| Limited English proficient        | 14                 | 8%                         |
| Low income                        | 134                | 76%                        |

The following participants conducted the site visit on December 11, 2012:

- Alison Bagg, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), Charter School Office (CSO)
- Barry Barnett, ESE, CSO
- Puja Garg, ESE, CSO
- Joanna Laghetto, ESE, CSO
- Matt Leaf, Four Rivers Charter Public School
- Ellie Rounds, ESE, CSO
- Todd Sumner, Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School

Before the visit, the site visit team reviewed the school’s 2011-12 annual report, the 2011-12 Year Two Site Visit Report, board materials, and recent internal and external assessment data.

On site, the team reviewed curricular documents and other information provided by the school. The team conducted approximately 21 regular education classroom observations and 12 resource room observations. The team interviewed trustees (4), administrators (6), teachers (8), families (6), and students (13).

The purpose of this visit was to corroborate and augment the information contained in the school's annual report, to investigate the school's progress relative to its accountability plan goals, and to collect information that will help the Commissioner and Board of Elementary and Secondary Education make a renewal recommendation for the school's charter. The focus of the visit was on three central areas of inquiry:

- Faithfulness to the terms of the school's charter;
- Academic program success; and
- Organizational viability.

The team's findings in each of these areas are presented below.

### **I. Faithfulness to the Terms of the Charter**

**Are the school's mission, vision, educational philosophy, and pedagogical approach, as articulated in the charter application and subsequent amendments, implemented in the day-to-day operations of the school?**

*Finding: In its third year, SOKCS is working to implement many of the promises of its charter. Some elements have been altered or abandoned due to the reported impracticality or misalignment to the needs of the student population.*

All stakeholder groups identified similar aspects of the school's mission: a focus on academic success with the goal of college for all students; the cultivation of character; and a curricular emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). While noting areas for improvement in implementing STEM, all groups provided examples demonstrating progress toward the goal of character development and college preparation.

This year, SOKCS is working to implement key aspects of the mission. Stakeholders reported that the school has established systems and structures to prepare students for the college application process. SOKCS administers the PSATs and provides PSAT prep classes to students. Additionally, this year the school has established a college counseling program.

While not directly speaking to the Soka philosophy as outlined in the charter application, stakeholders all provided examples of the school's emphasis on character development. The use of the Soka philosophy was presented in the charter application as the cornerstone of school culture. Elements of the philosophy emphasized in SOKCS's application are the creation of a system of values in order to provide character development. The values include: reaching one's full potential, individual responsibility, perseverance, mentoring, respect, and protection of the environment. This year, students take a weekly character development class, the school has established monthly values that align to Soka values, and student groups are participating in service projects at the school.

Further, as noted below in the academic success section, student performance on the 2012 English language arts and mathematics MCAS assessments has shown some improvement from

the prior year. While administrators and board members pointed to this as evidence of academic success, both groups noted that the level of performance was still an area for improvement.

The school's charter application promises a model that delivers "high-standards academic learning" consisting of an international course structure, academic intensity, and an emphasis on math and science. Administrators and teachers reported that the international course structure has been altered. In the model articulated in the charter, students are meant to take "subject-specific, multi-year courses," with students taking five science courses in grades 7 through 12, additional math periods each week that present multiple math strands at once, and a chronological humanities curriculum. Administrators and teachers noted that this model was not appropriate for the academic needs presented by the SOKCS students. This year, the math curriculum is presented in a traditional progression, one strand at a time. Administrators reported that all eighth grade students take Algebra 1. All grades take multiple science classes (3 or 4) concurrently. English language arts and history classes are presented by topic, rather than chronologically. The school's schedule does not allow for the number of additional math and science classes (6-8 of math and 9-11 of science) as envisioned in the charter. This year, students take four periods of math a week and a range of five to eight periods of science each week. Administrators reported, however, that the school offers longer class periods (65 minutes in length) that provide additional time focused on math and science. The board of trustees, teachers, and administrators all pointed to the provision of STEM as an area for improvement. While positive changes were noted with the addition of science kits for middle school classes and the addition of computer science class, a universal desire for more science resources (labs, textbooks, equipment) was expressed. For the first two years, SOKCS provided students with wireless netbooks as outlined in its charter. Administrators reported that this was impractical and has instead purchased textbooks to deliver the school's curriculum. Administrators did note that students had access to online, interactive software from home.

**Is the school's governance/leadership structure implemented as articulated in the charter application and subsequent amendments?**

*Finding: The school has employed four executive directors since its opening. Administrative turnover has led to an environment in which the school is in the process of improving, or implementing for the first time, many systems and structures one might typically find at a school. At the end of the school's first year (June 2011), SOKCS's founder and executive director resigned. A former board member became the school's interim, part time executive director and served until a full time executive director was hired in January 2012. At the end of the school's second year (June 2012), the newly hired executive director resigned. The school's current executive director was hired in July 2012 and previously served as a teacher at the school. She had been a finalist for the executive director position during interviews conducted by the board during the 2011-12 school year. The current executive director was serving in an interim capacity until November 2012. After an informal evaluation by the board, the board offered her the permanent position of executive director. Stakeholders identified the new executive director as a clear leader who has rectified many past issues. Teachers remarked upon the improved transparency and accessibility this year and praised the administration for proving a clear vision.*

As noted throughout this report, as a result of instability at the administrative level, many systems and structures typically found at a school are still in the process of being implemented or revised. The curriculum is under development, charter promises are partially implemented,

teaching and learning expectations have yet to be clearly articulated, structures and processes for teacher evaluation and development had not yet been formalized, and the school still lacks adequate resources to deliver its academic program. Additionally, many documents due to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) were late or never submitted, such as: the school's accountability plan, the 2011-12 annual report, a revised enrollment policy, board of trustees disclosure forms, and paperwork for a federal grant. The school's annual report, statutorily due by August 1 of every year, has not yet been submitted to the Department.

**Has the school met, or is it making progress toward meeting, the faithfulness to charter objectives set out in its accountability plan?**

*Finding: The accountability plan for SOKCS is in draft form.*

The Charter School Office received a draft accountability plan from the school in October of 2012 and is working to finalize it with the school.

## **II. Academic Program Success**

### **A. Curriculum**

**What is included in the documentation of the curriculum and what form does it take?  
Is the school's documented curriculum aligned with state standards?**

*Finding: The school is in the process of documenting its curriculum. The English language arts documentation was robust and complete; other subject areas used a newly created unit plan template, but did not always reference the Common Core (CC) or Massachusetts curricular framework standards (MCF).*

In the school's first two years it depended upon curriculum created by external consultants. The original curriculum was derived from the Advanced Math and Science Academy Charter School's curriculum. During the year two site visit, teachers reported that the original documented curriculum was not useful and did not meet the academic needs of SOKCS students. Further, they reported that they had scant resources as the school's curriculum was meant to be paperless and conveyed thought netbooks provided to every student.

This year, teachers reported that curriculum maps are being created and that teachers are expected to draft unit plans using a common template. Further, teachers reported that this year, they have been supplied with textbooks to inform their unit planning. Teachers reported satisfaction with the commercial curriculum and noted that they were using the CC aligned textbooks to guide unit and lesson planning. Teachers reported that the goal was to map the entire curriculum by June.

Site visitors viewed the documented curriculum and found that the depth and breadth varied from subject to subject. The English language arts (ELA) curriculum had been documented and included the following elements: an analysis of MCAS scores and action plan; curriculum overview by grade (7-12); a summer reading program; common ELA department expectations for student academic work; common rubrics; project exemplars; pacing guides; unit plans using the school's template that included references to the MCF or CC; material resources for every grade; and a guide aligning the commercial curriculum (Pearson) to the CC. Other curricular areas did not include all the elements outlined above. Science curriculum materials varied with some subjects using the new school wide unit template and others not. For example, physics

curriculum documentation included the unit plan template, but did not have a timeline, any reference to the MCF, and only occasional references to the CC. Some subject area documentation lacked any reference to the MCF or the CC.

## **B. Instruction and Learning**

**Is the observed instructional practice consistent with what the school describes, either verbally or in writing?**

*Finding: A majority of observed instructional practice was not consistent with what the school administrators described verbally or in writing.*

Site visitors were told to expect the following instructional practices in SOKCS classrooms: active student engagement; use of technology; students participating in projects, such as science investigations or experiments; interactive and student driven math classes; a mix of student and teacher centered instruction, differentiation; activation of critical thinking skills; and the incorporation of the Soka values. In general, site visitors noted that the expected elements were found in a some classrooms – approximately a fourth of those observed – but, were not widely seen in the remaining classrooms. Each element is further discussed below.

**Active engagement:** As noted above, site visitors observed 21 classrooms. In approximately a third of observed classrooms site visitors saw active student engagement. In these classrooms students participated in group work, investigated a physics lab, analyzed a novel, worked with the teacher on math problems, and analyzed data. In the remaining two-thirds of observed classes, a majority of students were not actively engaged throughout the lesson. In these classes a lack of routines, student misbehavior, uneven pacing of the lesson, off task behavior, or students not paying attention were seen as evidence that students were not actively engaged. In some classrooms students were engaged for part of the lesson, but disengaged after a transition.

**Use of technology:** Site visitors saw six classes in which technology was used. Use of technology included: use of an iPad to demonstrate math problems, students using graphing calculators, three instances of PowerPoints used to project notes or problem sets, and one class in which students used laptops.

**Students participating in projects (science investigations or experiments):** Five observed classes involved investigations or experiments. In three instances, the use of an investigation to explore a science concept was well executed and students were engaged in meaningful learning. In two remaining instances, time was not effectively used or the activity was dangerous. In one class, ninth graders spent 30 minutes planting seeds in cups. In another, students chipped away at charcoal with industrial sized nails; students were not wearing safety goggles.

**Interactive and student driven math classes:** Site visitors observed six math classes. All six had some interactive or student centered element within the class. One class (observed twice) involved the use of a game to demonstrate probability. Other examples of student driven / interactive lessons included student presenting information to the class, students working problems on the board, teacher directed questions, and group work. Some of these strategies were effective in eliciting student participation and engagement, others were less effective.

**A mix of student and teacher centered instruction:** Over half of all observed classes were teacher led, consisting of lecture, notes, teacher-led questions and answers, or teacher demonstration. In



the remainder, site visitors observed a mix of both student and teacher centered instruction (approximately a third), or student centered instruction (the remainder).

**Differentiation:** Site visitors did not see overt evidence of differentiation. All students in observed classes appeared to be completing the same tasks at the same time. A few, but not all, of the sample lesson plans gathered by site visitors contained specific accommodations or modifications for students in classes.

**Activation of critical thinking skills:** In five classrooms, site visitors observed that teachers were eliciting critical thinking skills from students. In these classrooms, students conducted inquiries, gathered and analyzed data, researched history projects, and engaged in science experiments. In three classrooms, visitors found partial evidence of critical thinking. In half of the classrooms observed (11), visitors found no use of critical thinking skills. In these classrooms, students were engaged in activities that were below grade level or required little cognitive engagement.

**Incorporation of Soka values:** Only one class observed integrated Soka values. It was a character development class that was focused on respect.

### **Is the classroom and school environment orderly, and does it support student learning?**

*Finding: Though the school environment was improved from last year, it remains an area for school improvement. Common areas and hallways were not orderly. Some classrooms were disorderly.*

Teachers, students, and administrators reported that the school environment is much improved from the school's second year. Teachers and administrators reported that the school's consequence system has become more consistent and that follow through on discipline issues has been swifter. Students, however, did not describe the discipline system in a consistent manner.

Site visitors found that approximately a third of observed classrooms had established routines and a respectful environment that was conducive to student learning. Little time was wasted in these classrooms and students were engaged in the learning activity. In approximately half of the observed classrooms, teachers had only partially instituted routines. In these classrooms student behavior or disengagement at times interfered with learning. The remaining four classrooms lacked routines and the environment was either characterized by a lack of respectful behavior or a lack of urgency about learning. In these classrooms, little learning took place.

At the beginning of the visit, school administrators stated that teachers handled discipline within the classroom and noted a school wide practice of providing "passports" for students who needed to take breaks from instruction. Site visitors noted a lack of consistent norms for classroom behavior which led to the varied level of engagement and behavior between classes. Site visitors did not see posted behavior expectations. Classroom teachers displayed a range of skill in managing classrooms.

Of note, visitors also observed additional instructional spaces and periods that were not included in the summation of instruction or classroom climate descriptions above. Visitors informally observed three classes during enrichment block and a technology class. The enrichment block classes varied widely in purpose and climate: one observed class was focused and on task and two others were disorderly and lacked purpose. In the technology class, the visitor observed unsafe behaviors between students, such as roughhousing and inappropriate touching. Additionally, site visitors observed disorderly conduct during transitions between classes.

**Is instruction effectively delivered and are students engaged in meaningful learning?**

*Finding: Site visitors did not see a majority of students engaged in meaningful learning; strong examples were isolated. In a majority of classrooms, site visitors observed students completing work that was below grade level.*

As noted above, site visitors observed actively engaged students in approximately a third of classrooms. In those classrooms with active engagement, teachers and students participated in a meaningful learning activity. In a majority of classrooms, however, site visitors did not see all students engaged in meaningful learning. In these classrooms, students were not challenged and the subject material presented was below grade level. The use of learning objectives was not observed in a majority of classrooms and often visitors could not discern the goal of the lesson. Further, during the focus group teachers reported that SOKCS needs to formulate and articulate to teachers expectations on “how to teach.” They reported that expectations are informally communicated through discussions with colleagues. Additionally, teachers expressed a desire for consistent rules for student behavior across classrooms.

**Do the school’s instructional practices include the implementation of strategies that address the needs of diverse learners, including special education students?**

**Special Education**

The site visit included a federal programs component. The school serves approximately 30 students identified as requiring special education, or 17 percent of the total population of the school. The program is administered by a qualified special education administrator who oversees two full-time special education teachers. Students are served on an inclusion push-in basis, and in a resource room pull-out setting. At the time of the review the administrator reported that all Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for the current year had been either rewritten or amended to accurately reflect the daily instructional schedule. Thus far in the current school year, two students have been reassessed and exited from special education, having been determined to no longer require services.

The administrator’s duties include oversight of the special education instructional staff, ensuring the implementation of federal and state special education laws and regulations, chairing all special education team meetings at which IEPs are developed. The administrator reports excellent parent participation at IEP team meetings, with only one instance of a parent not having been present for a team meeting. Assessments are performed by three contracted school psychologists who reportedly use a wide array of assessments to analyze the educational needs of the students. An additional seven students receive accommodations pursuant to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 for various disabilities affecting a major life area but who do not require specialized instruction or related services.

*Finding: Special education administrative and instructional staffing has been increased since last year.*

Last year’s [.2 FTE] special education administrator has been replaced by a full-time administrator who is experienced and knowledgeable in the field, and holds administrator licensure in the state of Rhode Island. The school has also hired a second full-time special education teacher.

*Finding: Accommodations and supports for students in the general education classroom are limited. There is no child study team.*

Classroom observations indicated that limited accommodations were made in the general education classrooms except those implemented by the special education teachers. Limited differentiation of instruction was seen, and additional student support was described as consisting largely of tutoring either after school or during the student enrichment block. Administrator interviews indicated that there is no child study team presently operating at the school. A small amount of related services called for in IEPs, specifically speech therapy, is not being provided. The school reports having had difficulty obtaining a service provider on account of the small number of hours needed.

*Finding: The special education program does not have a formal process in place for observation and feedback to staff.*

Although the school reports frequent meetings between special education teachers and the program administrator, formal observations of teachers with feedback regarding performance has not yet been conducted.

*Finding: A data-based self-evaluation of the special education program has not been conducted.*

A program self-evaluation that includes multiple measures of student progress to evaluate the special education program's effectiveness in providing students with disabilities access to the general education program has not yet been conducted.

*Finding: In resource classrooms observed, specialized instruction was robust and skillfully delivered.* Instruction delivered in the resource room included small group instruction (3:2) being delivered to students including repeating directions, reading directions aloud, taking turns reading aloud between the teacher and the student, organizational support, frequent pauses to offer additional explanation and clarification to students as needed and other supports as needed. In the general education classrooms observed the special education staff worked largely with students to whom they are assigned conducting frequent check-ins and providing in-class support including asking clarifying questions, providing additional explanation of directions and words in the test and providing students with breaks as needed. Although a single instance was observed in which the classroom teacher switched off to the special education teacher halfway through the class, no other integrated co-teaching was observed.

## **English Language Learners**

The school reports 14 English language learners (ELL) presently enrolled in the school, of which 2 were identified during the current school year. The ELL population comprises 8 percent of the overall population of the school.

*Finding: There is no English language learner program at the school.*

At the time of the review, no one at the school was trained to administer assessments to students who are potentially limited English proficient, or the annual assessment of students enrolled in the ELL program. As a result, students are all operating under the proficiency levels previously assigned and the current proficiency levels of students is not known. The two students identified as ELL this year were not appropriately assessed prior to entry into the program.

Only a single teacher at the school is fully trained to provide sheltered English language instructional content. The school will need to actively engage in the upcoming Rethinking Equity and Teaching for English Language Learners (RETELL) trainings in order to improve provision of sheltered content instruction. There is no teacher at the school who is licensed as a teacher of English as a second language, and no students receive English language development instruction.

**How and from whom do teachers receive feedback, guidance, supervision, and evaluation to improve instructional practice and student achievement?**

*Finding: Teachers are informally observed by a variety of administrators and department chairs. SOKCS plans to implement the ESE model evaluation rubric for evaluation.*

Last year, SOKCS teachers reported that there was no system – formal or informal – for teacher supervision, feedback, guidance, or support. This year, teachers reported informal systems are in place. SOKCS has introduced the position of department chair to provide teachers with support and guidance. Department chairs along with other administrators have conducted informal observations of teachers using a checklist tool. The school plans to implement the ESE model educator evaluation system. At the time of the visit, the administration had provided the ESE teacher evaluation rubric to staff, but had not yet begun implementing the system.

*Finding: The provision of professional development was noted as an area of improvement.* Administrators and teachers reported, and teacher survey data confirmed, that professional development opportunities needed to be better targeted to meet teacher needs. Professional development agendas provided to the site visit team (September through December) focused on housekeeping issues, Response to Intervention processes, and review of discipline policies. The school's executive director noted that one of her priorities was to better support staff with targeted professional development opportunities.

**How is qualitative and quantitative data used to inform planning and improve student achievement?**

*Finding: Teachers noted that the use of data to inform instruction was an area for school improvement. Site visitors found informal use of data to improve student achievement.* SOKCS administrators reported that the school currently administers the following assessments: the Dynamic Reading Assessment (DRA), the MCAS, and the PSAT. The school has discontinued use of the Terra Nova which was used during the school's first two years. School administrators reported that they would like to begin administering the Northwest Evaluation Association test (NWEA) and using TestWiz as well. While the administration reported that MCAS data had been analyzed to identify gaps, teachers stated that only the ELA department had conducted an analysis of MCAS data. Teachers stated that the school needed to "learn how to do more" to analyze data. The school is in the beginning stages of using data to provide supports for students. MCAS remediation is provided during the school's enrichment blocks for students who have scored below 220 on the mathematics MCAS.





### **C. Student Achievement**

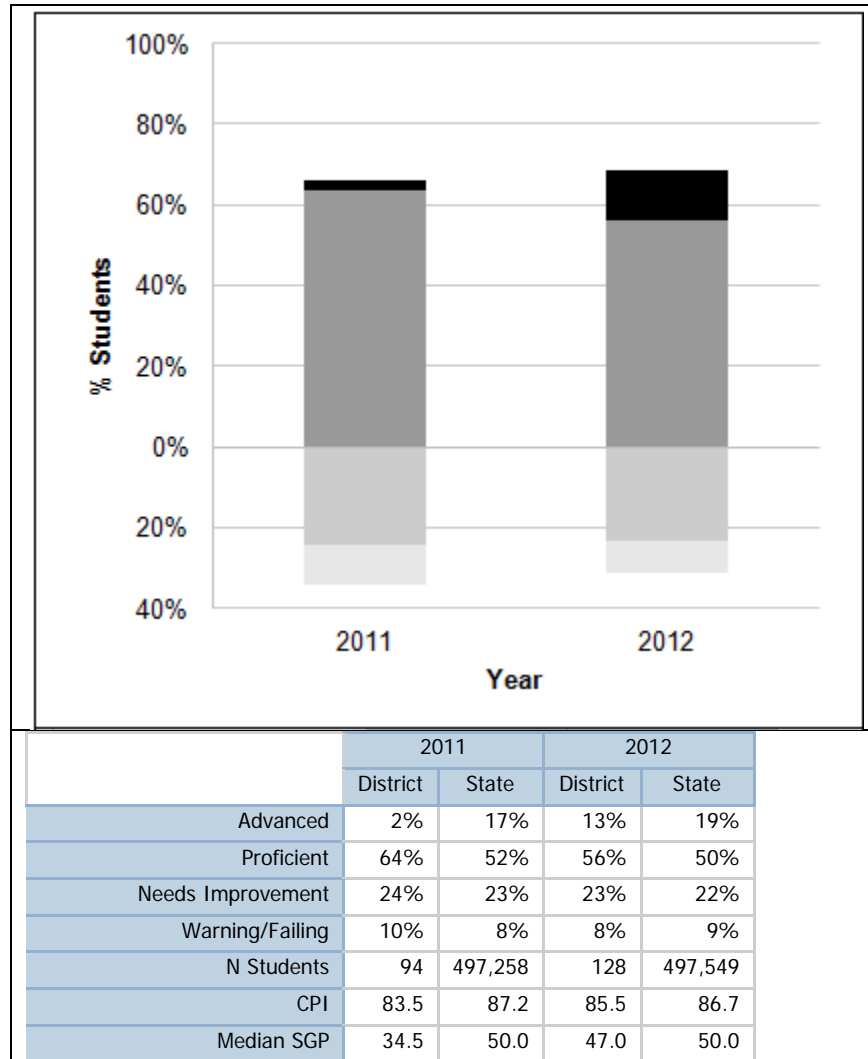
#### **Are students reaching Proficiency on state standards, as measured by the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)?**

*Finding: English language arts and mathematics MCAS scores for SOKCS students showed slight improvement in 2012. Science MCAS scores declined in 2012.*

All MCAS results for ELA and mathematics that are available from the last two years are presented below. This data includes the Composite Performance Index (CPI), a 100-point index that measures the extent to which students are progressing towards proficiency and which reflects the distribution of student scores over the four MCAS performance categories. The data also includes the median student growth percentile (SGP) for the school and each grade level. A student growth percentile (SGP) is a measure of student progress that compares changes in a student's MCAS scores to changes in MCAS scores of other students with similar achievement histories. The model establishes cohorts of students with similar performance profiles by identifying all students with the same (or very similar) MCAS scores in prior years. To report student growth at the subgroup, grade, school, or district level, individual student growth percentiles are aggregated, and the median student growth percentile is reported for that group.

### English Language Arts MCAS Scores

| Key: N = # of students tested; CPI = Composite Performance Index                  |                   |   |                     |   |              |   |                        |
|---|-------------------|---|---------------------|---|--------------|---|------------------------|
|  | Warning/Failing % |  | Needs Improvement % |  | Proficient % |  | Advanced/Above Prof. % |

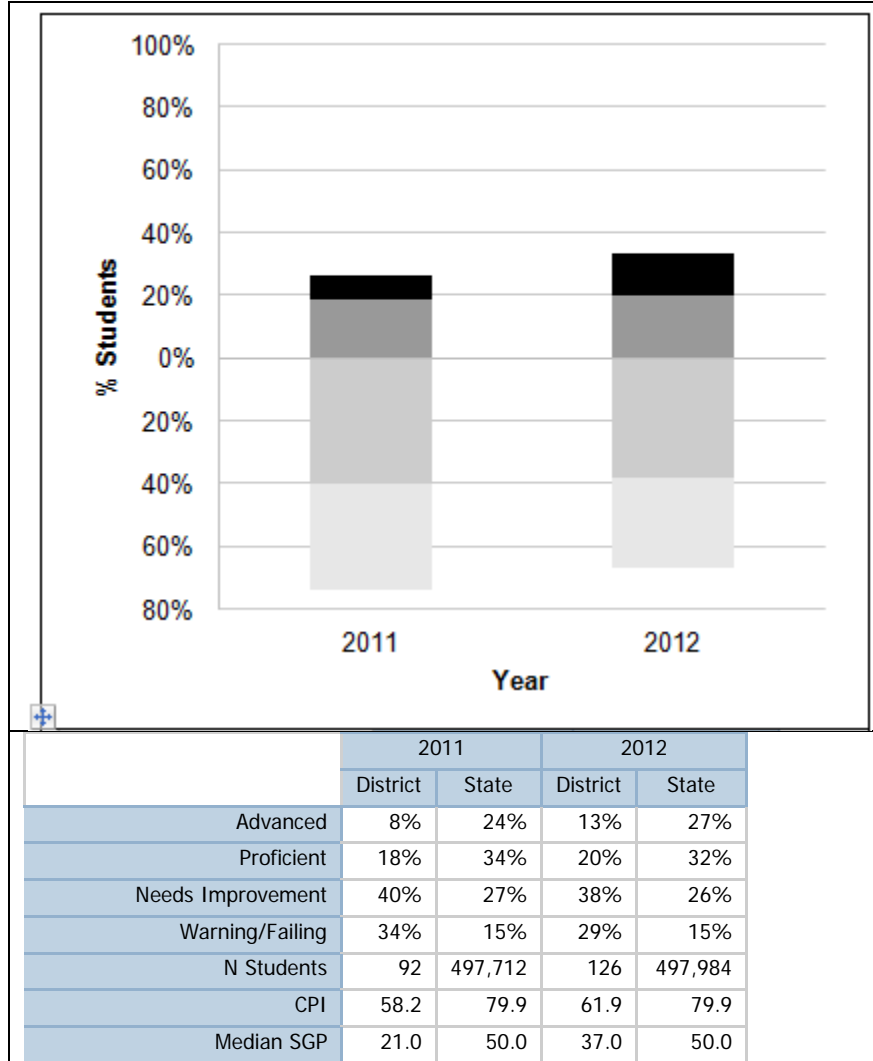


As noted above, rates of proficiency increased by three percent in 2012 with the percentage of students scoring in the Advanced and Proficient categories at 69 percent. Student Growth Percentile also increased from 2011 to 2012 with an SGP of 47.0 in 2012, close to the state median SGP.

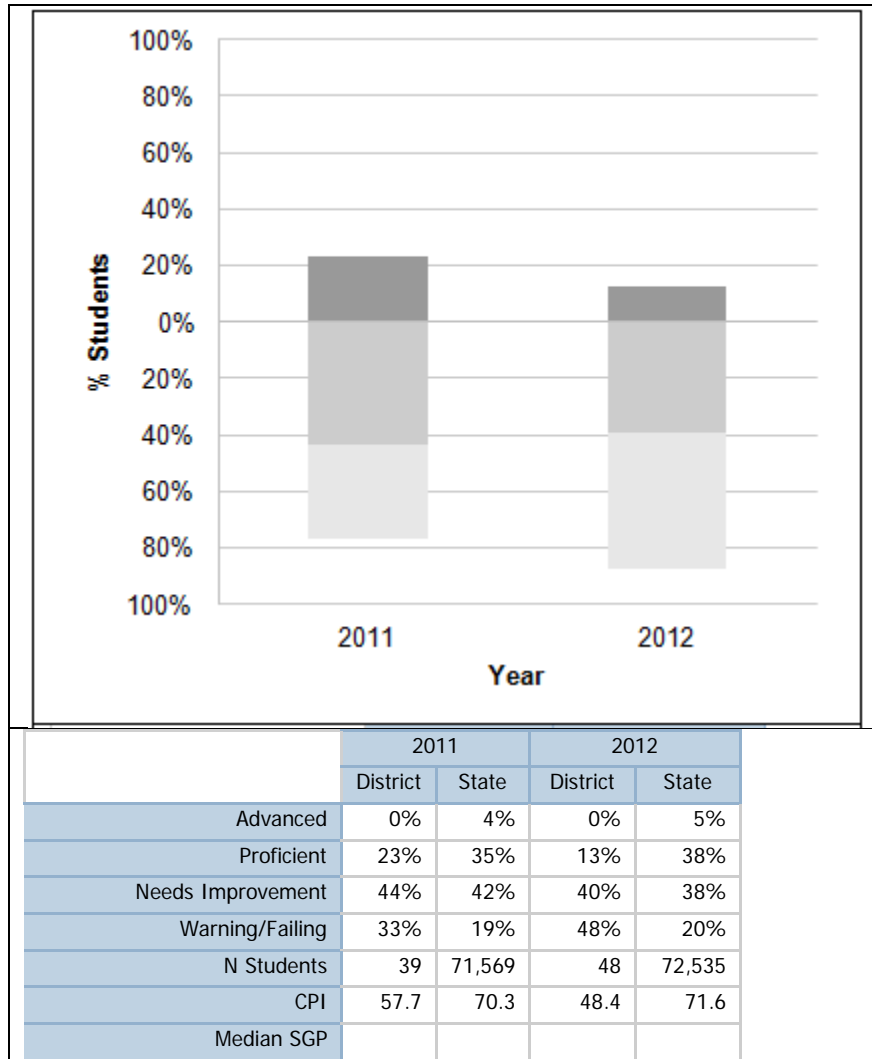
### Mathematics MCAS Scores

**Key:** N = # of students tested; CPI = Composite Performance Index

Warning/Failing %
  Needs Improvement %
  Proficient %
  Advanced/Above Prof. %



SOKCS mathematics MCAS scores also showed improvement in 2012, but overall proficiency and student growth remains low. In 2012, 33 percent of students scored in the Proficient or Advanced categories. Student growth percentile was in the low range at 37.0, below the state median of 50.0.

**Grade 8 Science MCAS Scores**

Eighth grade science scores declined from 2011 to 2012. In 2012, only 13 percent of students scored in the Proficient category, down from 23 percent the prior year.

**Has the school met or is it making progress toward meeting the academic success objectives set out in its accountability plan?**

*Finding: The accountability plan for SOKCS is in draft form.*

The Charter School Office received a draft accountability plan from the school in October of 2012 and is working to finalize it with the school.



### **III. Organizational Viability**

#### **Does the school have systems and structures in place to review the effectiveness of the academic program and guide its improvement?**

*Finding: The school does not have systems and structures in place to review the effectiveness of the academic program. Use of data is in its preliminary stages.*

In its third year, SOKCS is still building its program and has not had the time or resources to develop and implement systems and structures to review the effectiveness of the academic program. As reported by teachers, the use of data to inform instruction remains an area for school improvement. Many of the improvements made to the program between the school's second and third year were driven by clear and present needs: obtaining a new building, providing teachers with classroom resources, and creating a more orderly school. Further, while school administrators reported that teaching staff require professional development for classroom management and content area skills, as of the date of the site visit, the school had not provided extensive professional development or training in either of these areas. Staff survey data noted that monthly professional development offered had not been useful.

#### **How does the board of trustees provide oversight and leadership in key areas of the school, including academic achievement and fiscal planning?**

*Finding: The board of trustees provides minimal oversight and leadership of the school's academic program, fiscal processes, or facility. The board is currently operating with a membership that is below the minimum specified in its bylaws. The board has not complied with Open Meeting Law.*

Of the 16 founding SOKCS board members, three remain on the board today. At the time of the visit, board membership was five, including the executive director as an ex-officio member. The board's bylaws set the minimum number of board members at seven. Board minutes outline the existence of five committees (education, finance, governance, membership, and strategic initiatives) and one building task force. Of these committees, only finance and the building task force appear to be active based on reports from administrators and board meeting minutes.

Given the challenging transitions faced by SOKCS during the first three years (four executive directors, two facilities, and limited resources), the board reported that it had intervened in the day to day operations of the school, but that this practice had lessened over time. The board reported that they were confident that the current executive director had brought stability and leadership to the school. However, reports provided by the board and administrators and evidence in the board meeting minutes illustrate a board that is not providing adequate oversight of the school's academic program, fiscal health, or facility. Board members did not speak authoritatively about the school's MCAS performance. Further, the education committee has not provided a report to the full board in the past year, according to board minutes. Both board members and administrators reported that the board has minimal involvement in the school's budget development. The school faced a challenge in the summer of 2012 when its lease expired on July 31; the school had not located a new facility as of July 9. By August the school had secured a six month lease with St. Paul's, a former parochial school.

The school's 2012 audit notes that the SOKCS board has not complied with Open Meeting Law requiring the public notification of upcoming board meetings.

*Finding: The budget for FY13 was submitted late with unrealistic income projections. The school's FY12 audit noted several significant deficiencies.*

In the summer of 2012 the school did not develop its budget by the August 1 deadline. The submitted budget overstated tuition income and included a grant the school was no longer receiving. During the site visit the board reported a cash flow challenge and stated that the school would have a shortfall in FY13, however, administrators and board members also reported that the board had little involvement in the budget creation for FY13. Further, the school's 2012 audit noted a significant deficiency related to a lack of segregation of duties over cash disbursements. This same deficiency was noted in the 2011 audit and has not been remedied.

*Finding: The board has not evaluated the executive director and has not yet created a system to do so.*

While the board has employed four different individuals in the position of executive director, it has yet to create a formal system to evaluate the performance of the school's executive director. The board has never formally evaluated the performance of any of the executive directors. The current executive director noted that she is unaware of any plans to evaluate her performance. As noted above, the current executive director was made permanent after an informal evaluation by the board, however the board was unable to describe by what criteria she was evaluated.

### **Is the school environment physically safe and free from harassment and discrimination?**

*Finding: While citing improvement from prior years, students reported feeling unsafe at times. Thefts, bullying, and disorganized fire drills were reported as contributing to an unsafe environment. Site visitors viewed some unsafe behavior in classrooms.*

Administrators, students, and teachers reported that discipline systems had improved from the past year. The school hired a new dean of students for the current school year. However, administrators, students, and board members all noted that a few safety concerns remained. All groups noted that theft was a problem at the school and that there had been a few students who brought knives to school (thought no one was hurt). Students reported that during a fire drill they could not exit the building due to a locked door. Students noted that the drill was disorderly and made them feel unsafe. Additionally, students reported that bullying continues to be a problem for some students.

As noted above, site visitors saw a few instances of unsafe student behavior in classrooms – mostly during the enrichment block. Additionally, school hallways were disorderly during transitions.

### **Are the physical facilities adequate for the program of the school?**

*Finding: Stakeholders reported that the physical facilities are not adequate for the school's program. The school continues to search for a permanent facility.*

During the summer of 2012, SOKCS searched for a new facility within a very short timeline. The school's former landlord would not continue the lease and the school was able to enter into a six month renewable lease with St. Paul's Church. SOKCS occupies the second and third floors of a former parochial school. The nine classrooms are of differing sizes and were found to be either too small or too large for the number of students. Teachers share classrooms and as such classroom walls contain few content specific posters or student work samples. Further, classrooms did not appear to be neat and some were disorganized.

The board of trustees noted that the current facility does not allow for the number of students outlined in the school's growth plan. The facilities committee of the board, along with the executive director, is searching for a permanent facility. The current facility has a ramp in the rear of the building that provides access to persons with disabilities to a handicapped accessible bathroom and two rooms. The school is not using the two rooms at this time.

**Are professional staff members qualified by training and/or experience in the areas to which they are assigned?**

*Finding: Teachers have a range of experience.*

As noted in the table below, SOKCS teachers have a range of experience, with the majority of teachers having more than three years of classroom experience. Also, a majority of teachers are new to working at SOKCS, with over half of the instructional staff in its first year at the school.

**Years of Teaching Experience for Lead/Core Subject Teachers 2012-13**

|  | 1 Year | 2 Years | 3-5 Years | 6-10 Years | 11+ Years |
|--|--------|---------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Teachers with this number of years teaching          | 1      | 2       | 7         | 4          | 3         |
| Teachers with this number of years teaching at SOKCS | 11     | 3       | 3         | NA         | NA        |

N = 17 in core academic subjects

**Are school community members satisfied with the performance of the school?**

*Finding: Students and parents cited satisfaction with the school amid its challenges.*

Students and parents noted positive changes that have been enacted from the prior years. They noted that books and resources are available in the classrooms, discipline practices have improved, and that they like classes offered. Both groups also noted that the school's teachers stay after school to help students learn.

**Has the school met or is it making progress toward meeting the organizational viability objectives set out in its accountability plan?**

*Finding: The accountability plan for SOKCS is in draft form.*

The Charter School Office received a draft accountability plan from the school in October of 2012 and is working to finalize it with the school.