

# Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.  
Commissioner

## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education  
**From:** Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner  
**Date:** May 10, 2013  
**Subject:** Spirit of Knowledge Charter School - Recommendation for Probation

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Pursuant to the Charter School Regulations at 603 CMR 1.13(4), I recommend that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) place the Spirit of Knowledge Charter School (SOKCS) on probation in order to allow for the implementation of a remedial plan. My recommendation is based upon my continuing concern about the viability of this school. In nearly three years of operation, SOKCS has employed four executive directors, has not maintained a sound or stable financial condition, has failed to maintain adequate membership on its board of trustees, has not provided the academic model proposed in its charter, has not shown promising academic results, has a significantly decreased enrollment from what it projected in its application, and will face financial challenges as a result of its drop in enrollment. It is clear to me that the school's board of trustees has failed to oversee SOKCS effectively.

The Board has previously placed charter schools on probation during the term of their first charter. This action signals clear concern about the school with the hope that SOKCS can fulfill the probationary conditions and offer a successful educational program to the students it serves. Based on the success—or lack thereof—of SOKCS in meeting the conditions imposed in connection with its probation and in alleviating the causes of its probation, I will recommend further action as appropriate.

### **Mission Statement**

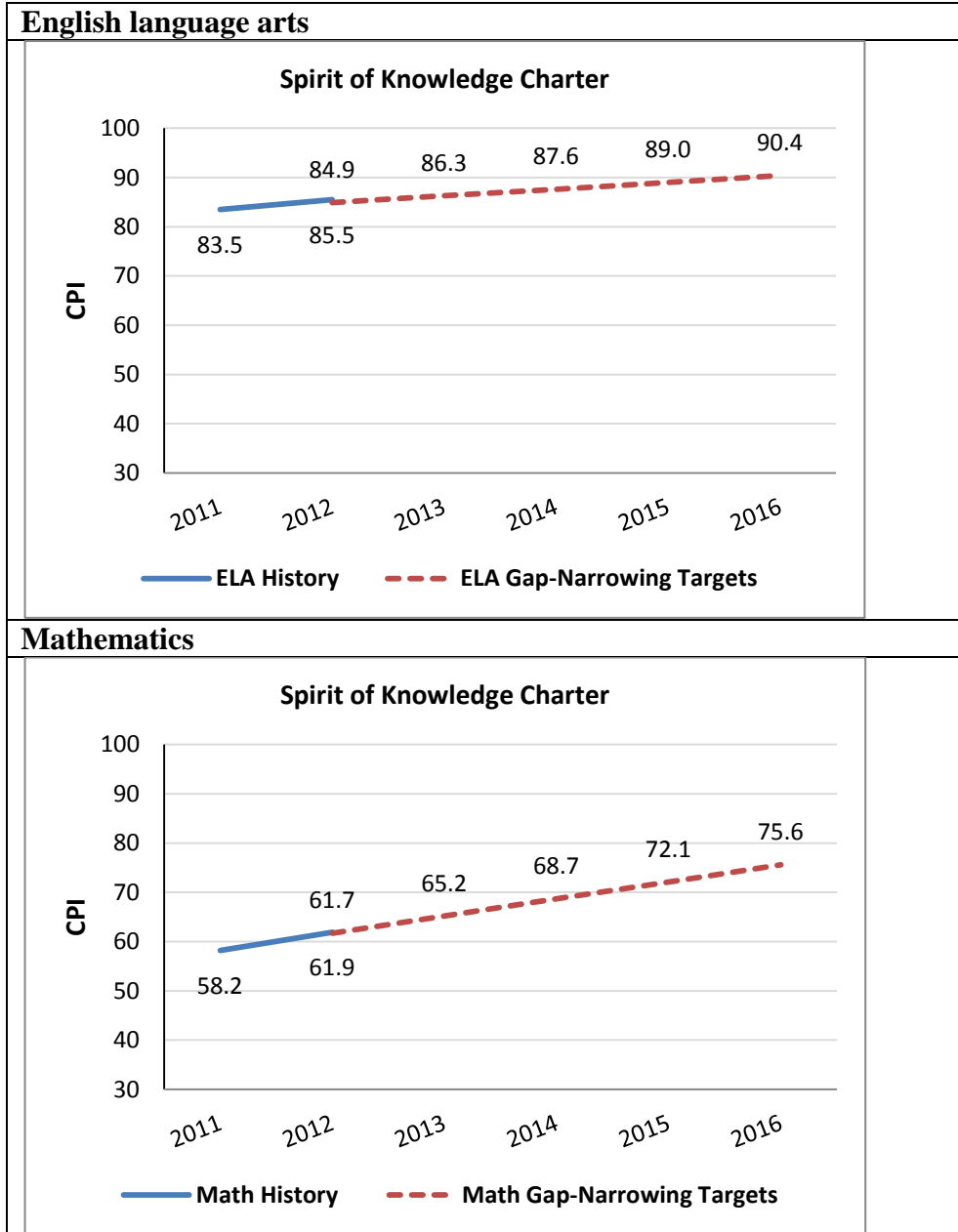
“The Spirit of Knowledge Charter School’s 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade Worcester students will create value in their lives and the lives of others through high-standards academic learning, especially in math, science and technology, gaining admission to college, and developing a positive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

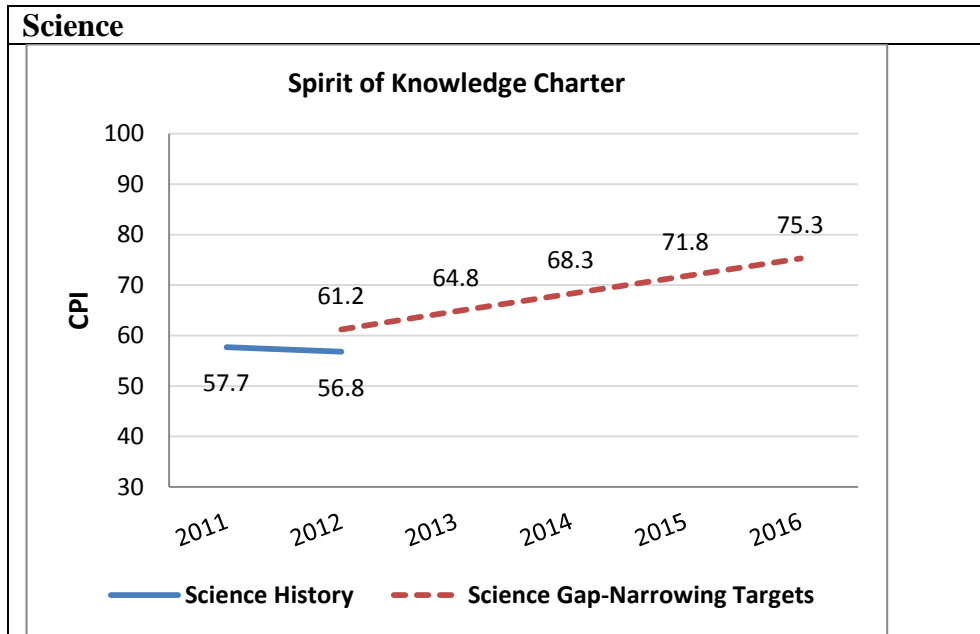
<b>Type of Charter</b>	Commonwealth	<b>Location</b>	Worcester
<b>Regional/Non-Regional</b>	Non-Regional	<b>Districts in Region</b>	NA
<b>Year Opened</b>	2010	<b>Current Enrollment</b>	176
<b>Maximum Enrollment</b>	275	<b>Students on Waitlist</b>	38
<b>Chartered Grade Span</b>	7-12	<b>Current Grade Span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

Substantial questions exist regarding the ability of SOKCS to manage the school effectively. These concerns are based on the issues identified below and further explained in the December 2012 Year Three Site Visit Report attached to this memorandum. My concerns are as follows.

- A lack of adherence the school’s mission, vision, and educational program as articulated in the charter application.
- The high turnover of individuals serving as executive director. The school’s founding executive director resigned at the end of the school’s first year, two individuals served and then resigned during the school’s second year, and the present executive director was hired in July 2012. She formerly served as a math teacher at the school.
- The school’s educational program is not well articulated or implemented at this time.
- Academic results have not been promising. Particularly concerning are the low math and science results, given that the school was chartered as a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) school. Please see the academic performance charts below.
- The board of trustees provides minimal oversight of the school’s academic program, fiscal processes, or facility.
- Of the 16 members of the founding board, three remain members today. With a current membership of five, the board is operating below its minimum membership as outlined in its bylaws.
- The board has not formally evaluated any of the individuals employed as executive director.
- The school recorded a deficit in fiscal year 2012 and did not prepare an FY13 budget by the deadline. The financial audits for the past two years have noted significant deficiencies.
- The school has not yet submitted its 2011-12 annual report, statutorily due by August 1, over nine months ago.
- The school has not submitted a current recruitment and retention plan.
- With an enrollment of 173, the school is not meeting the enrollment target of 240 students as specified in its charter for its third year of operation.

## Academic Performance





<i>SOKCS Median Student Growth Percentile</i>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>
<b>English Language Arts</b>	34.5	47.0
<b>Mathematics</b>	21.0	37.0

**Conditions and Probation**

I strongly recommend that the Board place SOKCS on probation, pursuant to 603 CMR 1.13(4), for the remainder of the school’s charter term. The school’s charter will expire on June 30, 2015 unless renewed.

I also recommend that the Board place the following conditions on the school’s charter:

1. Beginning in May 2013 and until further notice, the school must submit to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department), at [charterschools@doe.mass.edu](mailto:charterschools@doe.mass.edu) or 75 Pleasant St., Malden, MA, 02148, board meeting agendas, materials, and minutes prior to each board meeting at the same time that these items are sent to the school’s board members. The Department reserves the right to require the submission of additional information, such as quarterly or monthly financial statements, if board materials do not already include this information, and the school must provide such additional information within two business days.
2. By July 1, 2013, the school must submit a facilities plan. This plan must align with the growth plan specified in the school’s charter and must include timelines for leasing, construction, and improvements to ensure that the school’s facility is programmatically accessible for the remainder of the charter term.
3. By August 1, 2013, the school must submit an annual report for FY13 in accordance with the requirements outlined in the Annual Report Guidelines, including an updated

recruitment and retention plan.

4. By October 1, 2013, the school's board of trustees will engage in training conducted by an external consultant, acceptable to and approved in advance by the Department, on the roles and responsibilities of a board of trustees for a charter school.
5. By November 1, 2013, the school must submit its annual financial audit for FY13 in accordance with the requirements outlined in the Massachusetts Charter School Audit Guide ([http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/charter/charter\\_audit.html](http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/charter/charter_audit.html)). Such audit must indicate that the school has resolved all concerns indicated in the findings of prior audits and management letters.
6. By December 31, 2013, the school's board of trustees must have completed a comprehensive self-evaluation of its own capacity and must have recruited additional board members with needed expertise. Such new members must have been approved by the Department and be sufficient to meet the minimum number of members (seven) specified in the school's bylaws.
7. By December 31, 2013, the school's board of trustees must develop and implement a formal system of evaluation for the executive director.
8. By December 31, 2013, the school must provide documented evidence, corroborated through site visits, of consistent implementation of the key elements of its educational program in alignment with its charter. Alternatively, the school's board of trustees must request and receive approval for an amendment to its charter that accurately reflects the school's educational program.
9. By December 31, 2014, the school must demonstrate that it is an academic success by providing affirmative evidence of significant improvement in academic performance in English language arts, mathematics, and science.

Based on the success—or lack thereof—of SOKCS in meeting the conditions imposed in connection with its probation and in alleviating the causes of its probation, I will recommend further action as appropriate. The Department will continue to monitor developments at the school and conduct site visits. In addition to meeting the terms of its probation, SOKCS, like all charter schools, must also comply with the terms of its charter. I will provide the Board reports on the school's progress in meeting the conditions imposed on its charter.

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If you have any questions regarding this recommendation or require additional information, please contact Cliff Chuang, Associate Commissioner (781-338-3222); Jeff Wulfson, Deputy Commissioner (781-338-6500); or me.

Attachment: Motion  
2012 Year Three Site Visit Report