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Report: BPS special ed program putting Black and Latino boys at educational risk

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Mary Skipper, superintendent, Boston Public Schools, speaking at podium with a sculpture of Abraham Lincoln on her right. A new report of Boston Public School's special education program indicates that students of color are being disproportionately referred to the program.

David L. Ryan/Globe Staff
By Gwen Egan
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Boston Public Schools over-refer students to special education programs in general, but Black and Latino boys and students learning English are disproportionally referred to the program, according to a review from the Council of the Great City Schools.

The 129-page review of BPS's special education program, called "sobering" by Superintendent Mary Skipper, includes a laundry list of concerns about the program.

"Long-standing premises/biases triggering disproportionately high special education eligibility rates, especially for male students of color and English learners (ELs)," read one line about the review's themes.

According to the report, Black and Latino boys make up 53% of students with disabilities while only representing 35% of all BPS students. Students learning English represent 30% of the student body but 47% of students identified to have a hearing impairment, 46% of students with a communication impairment, and 55% of students with multiple impairments.

Michael O’Neill, a member of the school committee, told WBUR that this review was “a wake-up call to us on a critical issue.”

BPS’s “substantially separate placement rate”, or the rate of students who are sent outside of their home district due to a disability, is more than double the national average of 13% at 29%. The review also noted that a small number of schools are tasked with helping students with individualized education programs, or IEPs.
The review included a list of recommendations for the school district to begin to remedy these flaws in their programming.

This list includes: addressing the district’s overall high rate of disabilities in students, offering support before referring the student to the special education program, hiring experts, making sure students with disabilities aren’t sent to a smaller proportion of schools, and other suggestions.

“It’s going to take time, but we have to act with urgency wherever we can in the suggestions and recommendations in the report. It has to be done because our students cannot wait any longer for it not to be done,” Skipper said according to WBUR.