Black and Latino males make up more than half of all students receiving special education services in Boston Public Schools and are most likely to be segregated from the rest of their peers, according to an outside review that raises questions about the potential of racial and gender bias.

The disproportionate representation of Black and Latino males is a symptom of a much larger problem facing BPS, which funnels students with disabilities of all races and genders into separate classrooms at rates much higher than the state and nation, according to the review by the Council of the Great City Schools, a membership organization that represents the nation’s largest school districts, including Boston.

Raymond Hart, the council’s executive director, called the disproportionate representation of Black and Latino males in special education programs “glaring” and said BPS falls well behind the nation’s other large districts in integrating students with disabilities into general education classrooms. Most other urban districts have made inclusive classrooms routine practice.

Specifically, the report found that 29 percent of BPS students with disabilities are taught in “substantially separate” classrooms — a rate more than twice that of state and national averages.

“I know there’s going to be pressure from the community and others to change immediately, but taking time out to plan before implementing changes will be important and making sure the community understands that will be critical,” Hart said in an interview. “The challenges have been decades in the making and you can’t flip a switch and immediately change systems that have been in place for as long as these ones have.”

BPS commissioned the review as part of a state-mandated district improvement plan to address wide-ranging problems with operations, management, and instruction, including the disproportionate segregation of students of color with disabilities. The state over the years has repeatedly found BPS special education programs in violation of state and federal laws. A 2020 audit of the
district concluded that its special education services were in “systemic disarray” and hamstrung by high turnover in leadership that has continued since then.

Reviewing special education in BPS is somewhat familiar territory for the Council of the Great City Schools, which conducted a similar evaluation for BPS in 2009. That evaluation found many of the same problems.

Problems with special education go well beyond the lack of inclusive classrooms and include long delays in evaluating students for services and a high concentration of students with disabilities in low-performing schools, according to the report.

Yet once students with disabilities receive the services they are entitled to, many still struggle in classrooms, especially those who are not native speakers of English and are not fluent yet.

Superintendent Mary Skipper told the School Committee Wednesday night that she and her team are reviewing the recommendations and are committed to making improvements in special education. She said the report was “sobering to read.”

“We really need to work with urgency, but also to think about a multiyear process so that we get this right and that we really truly shift our mindsets and our practices in the field,” she said.

In one step toward progress, BPS this summer negotiated a new contract with the Boston Teachers Union that calls for all classrooms to be inclusive. The effort will take years and includes ramping up training for teachers so they can gain certification to work with students with disabilities and creating implementation plans to ensure all students will be well-served in classrooms.

Edith Bazile, an education advocate and retired BPS special education administrator, said BPS needs to move more quickly.

“There needs to be immediate transformational change so learning can occur now,” she said. “These students can’t wait until you train the current cadre of teachers over the next two or three years.”

The review included numerous recommendations, both big and small. Among them: phasing in the expansion of inclusive classrooms, noting the effort will
take years; improving the consistency and appropriateness of referrals, assessments, and eligibility decisions for special education by the beginning of the next school year; and developing key performance indicators for students with disabilities and a separate set for English learners with disabilities that include annual targets to measure growth.

Roxi Harvey, chair of the Boston Special Education Parent Advisory Council, said she hopes the recommendations will lead to long overdue changes.

“It is a good start to at least get to the bare minimum of serving some of the most vulnerable students in BPS,” she said.

Harvey has experienced the shortcomings of the system. When she enrolled her son, who is Black and Latino, a few years ago for preschool, BPS initially offered a placement in a substantially separate classroom, but Harvey refused to accept it. She fought to get him into a classroom with the rest of his peers. She said a friend had a similar experience with her son who is Black Cabo Verdean and Haitian American.

“It indicates a pattern of systemic racism of not servicing Black and Latinx students well with early preventative interventions,” she said. “If you believe a student/community doesn’t want to learn, you teach them in a manner for it to be self-fulfilling and reinforce bias.”

John Mudd, who serves on the School Committee’s English learners task force, said he was pleased the report stressed the need to provide English learners with disabilities access to instruction in their native language and called for a separate strategic plan for English learners with disabilities, noting they are “they are neglected as a group” and have unique needs.

But Mudd questioned BPS’s capacity to implement the changes — at least for now.

“Can BPS attract the leadership that is necessary to guide the systemic change that must occur if these kids are going to be given an opportunity to learn?” he asked, “and can BPS recruit hire and develop the teachers and paraprofessionals and administrative staff that is bilingual and competent to provide the support these students need?”