The East Baton Rouge Parish school system currently educates about 4,000 children with disabilities, roughly 10% of the students in the district. A team of outside educators, however, say that number is well below both the state and the nation, suggesting that hundreds, even thousands of children in Baton Rouge are not getting the help they need.

This is one of the many findings of an outside evaluation of special education in the parish school system conducted earlier this year by the Council of the Great City Schools.

Ray Hart, executive director for the Council, said the state average for children receiving disability services is 12.5% and 14.4% for the nation. The average among the 78 urban school districts that the Council counts as members — East Baton Rouge is one of them — is 16%.

“So you are significantly smaller in terms of your identification,” Hart told the parish School Board in a recent presentation.

If East Baton Rouge met the national average, it would be providing special education services to 1,700 more children than it is now. If it met the average of its peer districts in
the Council of Great City Schools, the school system would be identifying another 2,300 children in Baton Rouge for disability services.

This finding is part of a 219-page report completed this past summer by a six-member strategic support team provided by the Council as a perk of being a member. In the spring, the Council conducted a similar evaluation of the school system’s Human Resources department.

The Council’s evaluation teams are made up of school administrators who work for urban school districts in the fields being evaluated.

The special education team visited Baton Rouge in late January and early February, presented an early report to Supt. Sito Narcisse and his staff in the spring and then completed a final report over the summer. Hart gave a short presentation on the findings at the School Board’s Nov. 17 meeting.

In his School Board presentation, Hart hit on a few other big findings.

One involved whether the school staff are identifying the right disabilities and whether they are catching them early enough.

For instance, in the early elementary grades there’s a relatively high number of children who educators say suffer from speech language impairment, yet many students later determined to have specific disabilities, such as reading problems, aren’t diagnosed in large numbers until around fifth grade.
Hart said the results make his team wonder “might there be an opportunity to identify children earlier to provide additional supports to them.”

Board member Mike Gaudet was not surprised and inquired as to why.

“I’ve heard constantly we have a backlog at Pupil Appraisal,” Gaudet said.

Hart said his team did not take a deep dive to figure out why that has been happening, but he said some of the delay appears to be on purpose. He suggested further internal inquiry.

“If I’m not mistaken there is a grade level point where a number of appraisals are done, they’re done at a targeted point,” Hart said. “At that point, we did see a spike in the number of students who were identified.”

Another issue Hart highlighted is that many children with disabilities are not spending enough time in the regular education classrooms, which he defined as at least 80% of their day. About 70% of students with specific disabilities spent 80% or more or their day in regular education classes, but only 10% of children with intellectual disabilities and 12% of children with autism are in their classes as much. Only Baton Rouge children with emotional disabilities outpace the nation when it comes to percentage of time in the classroom.

“Students outside the classroom are missing grade-level instruction. They are pulled out,” Hart said. “They are missing instruction in either in mathematics, reading, English language arts, science, social studies for additional support services but they miss that instruction.”
The report offers detailed recommendations for how to fix the problems outlined, some of which are already under way. A big fix is for the school system to improve a districtwide shift instituted by Narcisse to what’s known as “multi-tiered systems of support,” or MTSS, which merges into one a couple of common school improvement strategies that have strong bases in education research.

The approach is new to most Baton Rouge educators. The Council conducted focus groups where they found that this transition so far “has been difficult for EBRPSS school personnel.”