



SUMMARY OF THE REPORT:
**Escaping from Old Ideas: Educating Students with Disabilities in the
Boston Public Schools**
Ellen Guiney

Abstract

In this paper, Ellen Guiney, Executive Director of the Boston Plan for Excellence, examines the ways in which the Boston Public Schools (BPS) has addressed the needs of students with disabilities. The paper focuses exclusively on the needs of the 85% of students with disabilities in Boston who do not have a readily identifiable disability (such as blindness or deafness). Guiney begins by documenting the current status of students with disabilities in the BPS. Next, the paper describes ongoing challenges as well as areas of progress that exist throughout the district. The paper concludes with recommendations for how BPS might address some of its current problems and improve the quality of special education across the district. The central thesis of the paper is that despite good intentions and significant expenditures, the way BPS is educating students with disabilities is not getting them the education they deserve, and BPS – and the state – must escape from an emphasis on compliance and the use of special education as a place to put any student with difficult behavior and/or learning problems.

Status of Special Education in the BPS

Guiney outlines the status of special education and highlights the following key issues with the implementation of special education in the BPS:

- Too many students are designated to special education and relegated to separate classrooms, and too many special student populations are overrepresented by gender and race. For example, one in three black male students are enrolled in special education, as compared with only one in eight white females.
- Too many students with learning or behavioral difficulties, not disabilities, are designated to special education.
- The costs of special education are too high for too few results.

Areas of Progress

According to Guiney the district has begun to focus on the issues specific to special education students. Some of the improvements made in the past few years include:

- The district initiated a pilot program where students are screened (in some cases every student in a class) and matched with services that specifically address each student's needs;
- Special education has been moved to the office of the Deputy Superintendent for Teaching and Learning to ensure greater coordination; and
- A district-based Evaluation Team Facilitator position was created, which improved the process for designating a student as eligible for special education services.

Recommendations for the Next Superintendent

- Refocus from referral to prevention and get reading instruction right.
- Create a reading course for high school and middle school non-readers.
- Expand well-designed inclusion classrooms so that permanent labels don't compound students' difficulties.
- Reconsider special education teacher certification.
- Review the practice of placing many students with disabilities and many kinds of programs in a single school.
- Revise the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process, which is part of the problem and potentially part of the solution.