

What is Significant Disproportionality?

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), states must collect and examine data¹ to determine if significant disproportionality based on race and ethnicity is occurring in the State and in local education agencies (LEAs). DESE examines and determines if disproportionality is occurring in LEAs in three areas:

IDENTIFICATION



The **identification** of children ages 3-21 as having:

- A Disability
- An Intellectual Disability
- A Specific Learning Disability
- An Emotional Disturbance
- A Speech or Language Impairment
- Other Health Impairments
- Autism

PLACEMENT



Placements of children ages 6-21:

- Inside a regular classroom less than 40% of the day
- Inside separate schools and residential facilities

DISCIPLINE



Disciplinary removals involving children ages 3-21:

- Out-of-school suspensions/expulsions of 10 days or fewer
- Out-of-school suspensions/expulsions of more than 10 days
- In-school suspensions/expulsions of 10 days or fewer
- In-school suspensions/expulsions of more than 10 days
- Disciplinary removals in total

DESE must calculate identification, placement and rates of disciplinary removal in the above categories for seven racial or ethnic groups (African American/Black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Hispanic or Latino, Multi-racial, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and White), comparing rates for each group to rates for all other children within the LEA. Where numbers are too small for comparison, DESE compares the rates for each groups to the state's rate in a category. These analyses must be done annually.

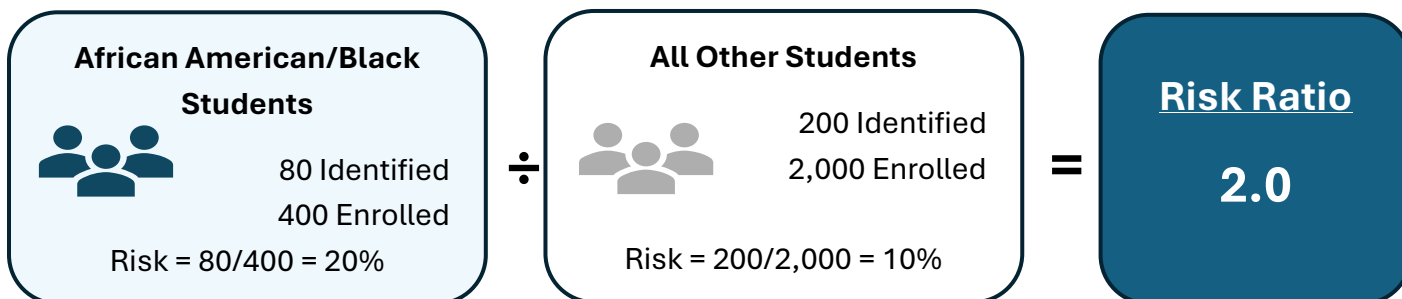
¹ [34 C.F.R. §300.647](#)

How DESE Calculates Significant Disproportionality

DESE uses a risk ratio² to compare the risk of a particular outcome for one racial/ethnic group to the risk for all other racial/ethnic groups in the LEA.

Risk Ratio Example #1 – Identification

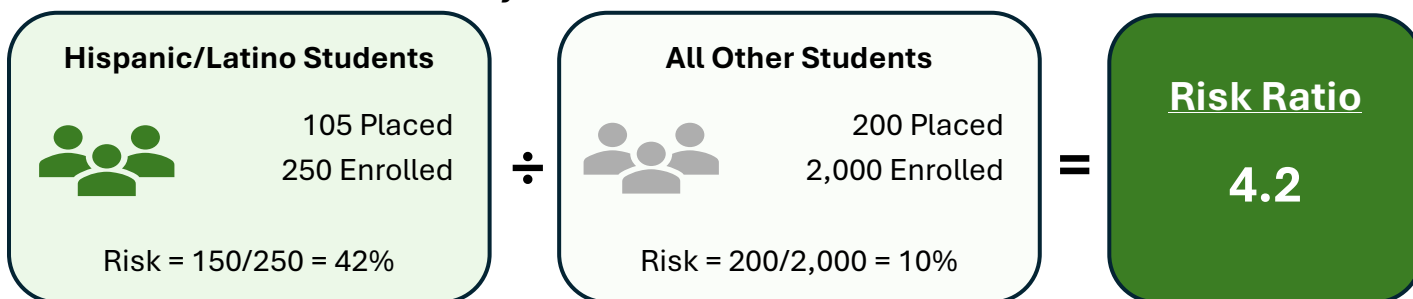
Example: *The likelihood that African American/Black students will be identified as a child with a disability, compared to children in all other racial and ethnic groups.*



African American/Black students in the LEA are **2.0 times as likely** to be identified as a child with a disability, compared to children in all other racial and ethnic groups.

Risk Ratio Example #2 – Placement

Example: *The likelihood that Hispanic or Latino students will be placed in a general education classroom less than 40% of the day.*



Hispanic or Latino students in the LEA are **4.2 times as likely** to be placed in a general education classroom less than 40% of the day, compared to children in all other racial and ethnic groups.

To make these calculations, DESE uses a risk ratio. An LEA is identified with significant disproportionality if its risk ratio for a particular racial or ethnic group in a particular category is **3.0 or greater** for each of the previous three years.

If there are not enough students in all other racial or ethnic groups in the LEA, DESE will use an **alternate risk ratio**. An alternate risk ratio is a calculation performed by dividing the risk of a particular outcome for children in one racial/ethnic group within an LEA by the risk of that outcome for children in all other racial or ethnic groups in the State.³

² 34 C.F.R. §300.647(a)(6)

³ 34 C.F.R. §300.647(b)(5)

Methodology

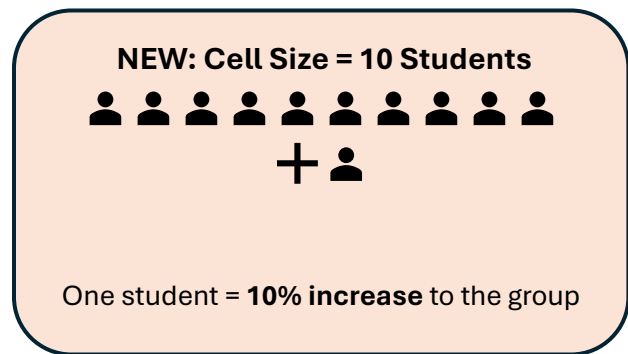
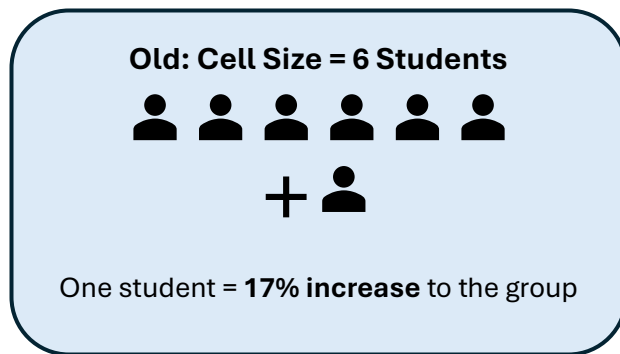
Beginning with the 2026-2027 identifications, DESE updated its methodology by **increasing the minimum cell size from 6 to 10 students**. All other components of the methodology remain the same.

DESE only calculates a risk ratio for groups that meet the minimum cell size (10) and n-size (30).⁴

Cell size refers to the number of children in the racial/ethnic group(s) experiencing a particular outcome. It is the numerator in the risk calculation.⁵

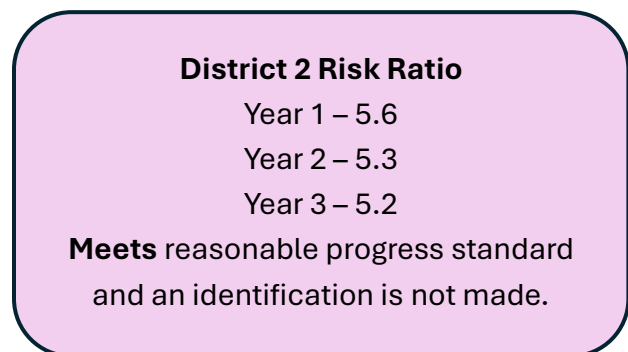
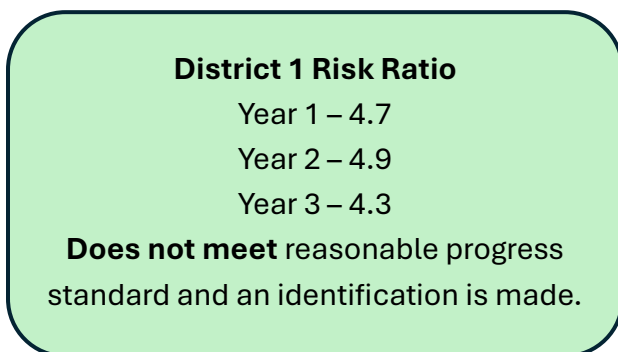
N-size refers to the number of children in the racial/ethnic group(s) enrolled in a district with respect to identification, placement, and discipline. N-size is the denominator in the risk calculation.⁶

The change to the cell size was made to improve reliability and statistical stability of annual identifications while continuing to meet all IDEA requirements.



Are There Any Exceptions?

A State is not required to make an identification of significant disproportionality if the LEA is making **reasonable progress**. Reasonable progress means lowering the risk ratio or alternate risk ratio for the group and category in each of the two prior consecutive years.⁷ In Massachusetts, an LEA is considered to have made reasonable progress if it has lowered its risk ratio or alternate risk ratio by at least 0.1 in each of the two prior consecutive years.



⁴ [34 C.F.R. §300.647](#)

⁵ [34 C.F.R. §300.647\(a\)\(3\)](#)

⁶ [34 C.F.R. §300.647\(a\)\(4\)](#)

⁷ [34 C.F.R. §300.647\(b\)](#)

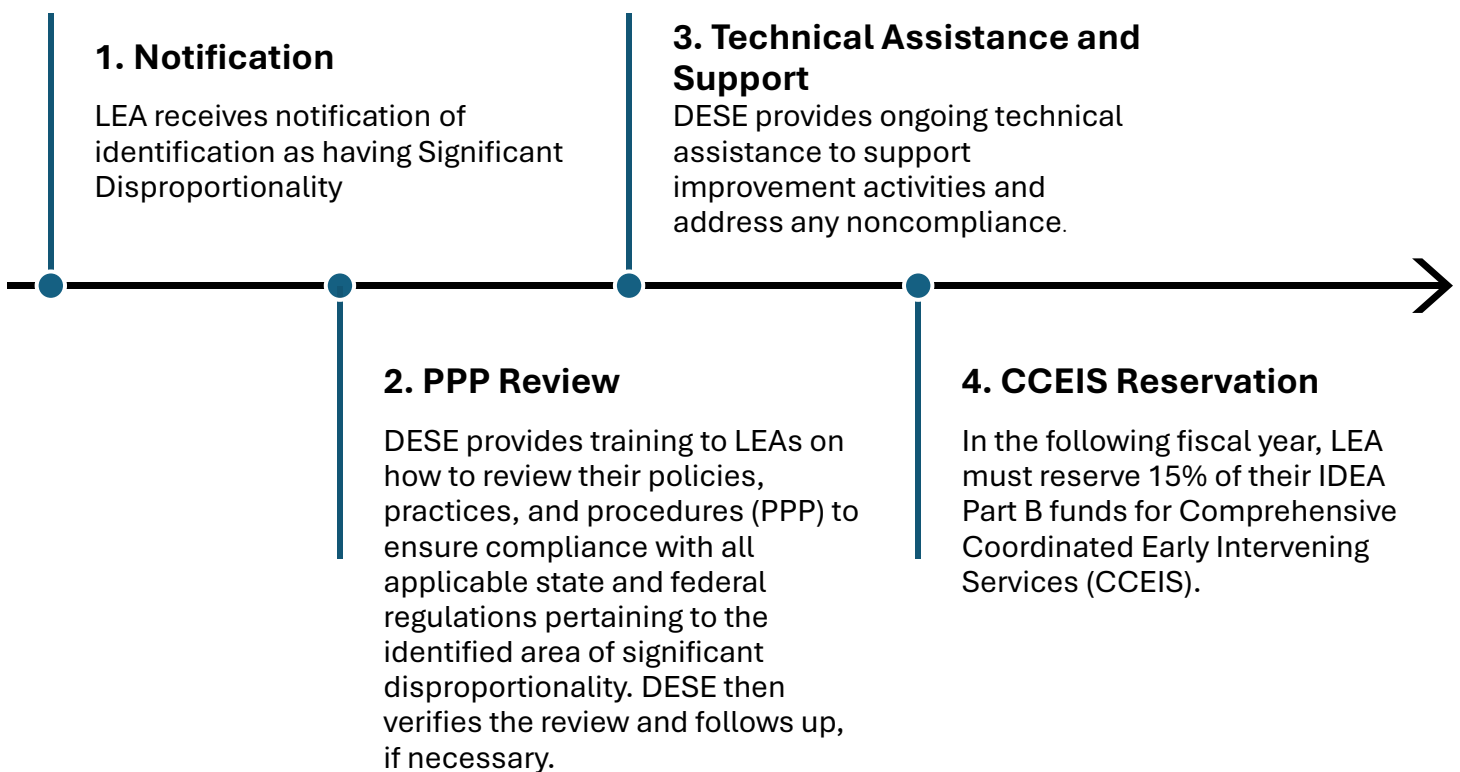
What Happens Next?

Identification Process

- **Data Collection** – DESE collects data annually from all LEAs on the identification, placement, and discipline of students with disabilities.
- **Risk Ratio Calculations** – Risk ratios are calculated for each racial/ethnic group in each category for three consecutive years.
- **Determine Significant Disproportionality** – If the risk ratio is 3.0 or greater for each of the three previous years, the LEA is identified
 - If an LEA is above the 3.0 threshold for two consecutive years, they are considered **At Risk**
- **Notify LEA** – DESE notifies the LEA of identification and next steps.

If Your LEA is Identified

DESE will work with your LEA through the following steps:



Learn More

Visit the DESE [Significant Disproportionality webpage](#) for additional resources, guides, and FAQs.

For questions related to Significant Disproportionality, please email IDEAData@mass.gov