In the wake of increased consideration by city officials, at-large City Councilor Peggy Davis-Mullen’s walk-to-schools proposal, has rekindled Boston’s often contentious debate over busing and school segregation. Opponents say the proposal would promote inequality and further segregate the schools, thereby violating the 1974 court order to desegregate Boston’s schools. Some also deem it unnecessary, arguing that the city’s “Controlled Choice” plan already allows most parents who choose neighborhood schools to send their children to them. Supporters of the plan say it’s what most parents, of all races, want for their children, and that it can be done without violating the court desegregation ruling.

“Every day, we struggle,” said Dorchester City Councilor Charles Yancey. “It seems to me to be euphemism for the old neighborhood school concept that arose as a strategy of resistance to integration,” said Dorchester City Councilor Charles Yancey.

Yancey said that the walk-to-schools proposal “hasn’t been clearly articulated and it seems to be a euphemism for the old neighborhood school concept that is a strategy of resistance to integration. In terms of feasibility of going back to neighborhood schools, we’ve witnessed a number of schools that have been closed down—I believe a disproportionate number in communities of color—so even if you were to agree with the philosophy of neighborhood or walk-to-schools, because of the shortage of schools in communities of color, it translates into the old language of separate but equal,” Yancey said.

“Will racial integration among schoolchildren hold 100% in every neighborhood?” Davis-Mullen asked. “Maybe not in the City Point section of South Boston, although even that neighborhood is much more diverse than it was. Maybe in Roxbury and West Roxbury we’d have a problem, but the mayor is talking about building new schools,” Davis-Mullen said. “They could be located on the cusp of these neighborhoods.”

Referring to the cost of busing, Davis-Mullen charged, “Not to move forward on an issue costing the city $40 million a year, when you don’t have the money for textbooks, is living in the Dark Ages.”

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT’S BROKEN THAT they [Davis-Mullen and Rossell] are trying to fix,” said Michael Alves, educational planner at Brown University and co-author of Boston’s “controlled choice” program. “The current program of controlled choice is a voluntary desegregation program designed to accommodate a high degree of choice—we actually have priority for students who want to attend a school in their walk zone (within a mile of their residence); 85 to 90% of those who opted for walk zone schools were assigned,” Alves contended. The walk-to-school proposal “is based on the assumption that all parents want their kids to go to the school nearest their home,” he said, “but the parents who pick walk zone are less than 40%.”

“The goal of it, as I understand it, is to end the choice program and to return to neighborhood schools,” said Gary Orfield, a former federal court decision and policy advisor at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education and the Kennedy School of Government. The Harvard Project on School Desegregation “recently did a study of a school system that partially returned to neighborhood schooling,” Orfield said. “It’s been found guilty in federal court of segregation 20 years ago for practices like this” said Jean McGuire, a Roxbury resident who formerly served on the Boston School Committee and now heads METCO, the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity. “Boston had set up a duel school system based on neighborhood schools, but that system did not have enough books to go around. There are schools that do not have enough supplies. We’re spending $400 million. How can that be?” she asked.

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“I DON’T SEE WHERE YOU COULD GO WITH [the walk-to-schools proposal] because it’s illegal—it’s against the Constitution. The Boston School System was found guilty in federal court of segregation 20 years ago for practices like this,” said Jean McGuire, a Roxbury resident who formerly served on the Boston School Committee and now heads METCO, the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity. “Boston had set up a duel school system based on neighborhood schools — they set it up where even in integrated communities the black kids went to one neighborhood school and the white kids to another. This is going back in time.”

Dorchester City Councilor Maureen Feeney, who backs Davis-Mullen’s proposal, said money saved from busing ($40 million a year), could be used to improve education in all the city’s schools, including enhancing special education and bilingual programs, thereby avoiding inequalities based on racial makeup of the school’s neighborhood. “If you go to any neighborhood — white, black, Hispanic — most parents want to see their children go to school in their neighborhood. That has nothing to do with race, it has to do with being a parent,” Feeney recently told Dorchester Community News. “There will always be some busing, because choice will never be eliminated,” Feeney said. “But hopefully the amount of money spent on busing will not be to the extent there is now.”

Feeney said an overemphasis on busing and racial integration has caused educators to lose sight of what’s really important: quality education. “We spend so much time debating where they’re going to go that we lose sight of the kind of education they’re getting. I know for a fact that their eyes are on schools that do not have enough books to go around. There are schools that do not have enough supplies. We’re spending $400 million. How can that be?” she asked.

“This is not a winning strategy,” said Yancey, who launched his political career 20 years ago as an anti-busing activist, also supports walk-to-schools. He pointed to a 1982 Boston Globe poll in which 82% of black parents endorsed neighborhood schools, and said neighborhood schools would lead to increased parental involvement and control over the schools and a tighter-knit sense of community among the students.

School desegregation remains an explosive issue in Boston. Results from the Boston Compact survey, which will shape the next round in the battle over walk-to-schools, will be available in September. Davis-Mullen said she “absolutely envision[c]” holding a series of hearings in neighborhoods across the city, similar to those held to discuss the residency requirement, sometimes this fall to address parents’ and students’ concerns and to better explain walk-to-schools to Boston residents.

Alexander Coolidge is a volunteer reporter for Dorchester Community News.