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.

"We need to be looking to the future," said the plan's most outspoken proponent, Councilor Davis-Mullen. "The city is really different demographically and emotionally. Boston is a very different city in 1994 than it was in 1974. People just have to open their eyes. Look out the front door. This city is a mosaic of different races and cultures. Children attending neighborhood schools would be of all races and backgrounds." Davis-Mullen said the "old neighborhood" approach -- to give children of color a better educational advantage -- and "to have better interracial exposure" -- and have not been achieved, and that therefore another approach is needed. "I liken it to health care. If after 20 years something is not working, it's time for a check-up," she said.

"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.

Dorchester City Councilor Charles Yancey, who chairs the City Council's Education Committee, recently told Dorchester Community News. "We don't know where we 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 MFTCO, the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity. "Boston had set up a duel school system based on neighborhood schools, thereby leading to a rapid increase of inequality among schools, parent participation went down further and the change did not halt 'white flight' from the school system, Orfield said.

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"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 a proponent of Boston's "controlled choice" program. "The current program of controlled choice is 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%.

"In terms of feasibility of going back to neighborhood schools, we've witnessed a number of schools that have responded. "Maybe not in the City Point section of Roxbury we'd have a problem, but the mayor is 100% sure that there are 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.

"I'm not convinced that Dr. Rossell has done a check-up," she said. Davis-Mullen, who chairs the City Council's Education Committee, recently told Dorchester Community News.

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