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BODY:

Deep inside the Mississippi Delta, where he once dodged Klan bullets and sharecropper adulation, Bob Moses has quietly returned to finish the task he started 30 years ago.

It's midnight in Mississippi, and memories stir as Moses walks through the deserted Jackson airport. Black men once feared traversing this state after dark. Tonight, despite the hour, he dials Doc Anderson, a local physician who in the 1960's had a busy sideline stitching up civil rights workers. "Guess what?" Moses says, laughing softly at his own audacity. "I'm here. Can you come get me?"

A call in the night from a man gone almost 30 years doesn't seem to faze people whose bonds were forged in the flames of civil rights era Mississippi. Few here have forgotten the shy, bespectacled math teacher who in 1964 guided Freedom Summer, busing hundreds of college students into backwoods Mississippi to educate and register black voters. "The purpose," Moses says, "was to break open Mississippi as a closed society."

Today he's seeking to open another closed society: the world of educational opportunity denied to poor children, black and white alike. His trademark overalls and baby face are gone, but the curiously unblinking gaze and hushed voice haven't changed at all. And now, in the same Delta towns where he was beaten and jailed three decades ago, Moses has reappeared -- retooled for the 90's as director of the Algebra Project, a crusade that experts say could revolutionize math education.

"It's our version of Civil Rights 1992," Moses says. "But this time, we're organizing around literacy -- not just reading and writing, but mathematical literacy." The parallels to the past, he says, are clear. "The question we asked then was: What are the skills people have to master to open the doors to citizenship? Now math literacy holds the key."

Labor and education experts agree. According to the Department of Labor, more than half of today's high-school graduates lack the analytic skills required for jobs. And minority groups, which by the year 2000 will constitute a third of all students, are lagging far behind.

Determined to reverse that trend, Moses established the first Algebra Project in Cambridge, Mass., in 1982. The idea was simple: Without algebra, the door to college and most skilled professions is locked. But many black and Hispanic students, if they take algebra at all, learn it too late to get on the college-prep mathematics track. So why not expose every child to algebra in middle school?

The techniques are vintage 1964. Just as Freedom School volunteers used examples from sharecroppers' own experiences to teach history and writing, Algebra Project students learn to think and "speak" mathematically by tackling problems that arise in their daily lives. The philosophical link is universal access: "It wasn't the right to vote for a few people," Moses says. "It was the right to vote for everybody."

The idea struck a deep chord in parents, teachers and school reformers. By its 10th year, the program stretched from Boston to San Francisco, winning accolades from the National Science

Foundation and reaching 9,000 inner-city youths. But for Moses, something was missing; call it a matter of the heart. Last year, joined by Dave Dennis, who co-directed Freedom Summer, Moses found his answer: the Delta Algebra Project of Mississippi.

Together, Bob Moses and Dave Dennis have returned to the bloodiest battleground of the civil rights movement. This time they're talking more about education than liberation. But the stakes are just as high, for they hope to revive a dream deferred.

Moses fears that, without critical thinking skills, the Delta's children will be "tossed by the wayside," like their parents and grandparents, the black sharecroppers of the 1960's. "They didn't have the citizenship requirements of their age," he says. "And so they were serfs, absolutely without power. What is happening now is that we are watching the new serfs emerge."

THE SLEEK BLUE VAN HURTLES PAST misty bayous and scrubby pine forests as Moses and Dennis head toward the Mississippi Delta. Dennis, his eyes red from fatigue, sips iced tea in a fruitless effort to stay alert. Moses grips the wheel and stares straight ahead. After a grueling weeklong Algebra Project workshop in New Orleans, they're on their way to another teacher training session in Itta Bena, Miss.

They make an odd pair: Moses' penetrating eyes and soft voice are virtually hypnotic; Dennis, with his easy laugh and fast talk, is an openly emotional man impatient with the pace of change. But they both came of age in Mississippi, and that experience shaped an intimacy that requires few words.

In the back seat, nibbling soybeans, is a long-haired young drummer, Ben Moynihan, lost in thought. He uses the contrasting rhythms of African drumming to explain math ratios to children, and he has come from Boston to demonstrate his techniques to Delta teachers. But this trip is largely a journey of discovery. For Ben is the child of two Freedom Summer volunteers -- one black, one white -- whom he has never met. And now, for the first time, he hopes to find some clue to their identities.

Inside the Delta, the road narrows, bisecting ramshackle towns where Coca-Cola still comes in green bottles and cotton is still king. Bits of fluff blow off the bale-laden trucks, forming a white spine down the highway, and cotton gins rumble beside the railroad tracks. Time and the catfish industry have subtly altered the Delta landscape. Many cotton fields are now flooded, gridded catfish paddies, with Canada geese paddling lazily on top. And there are no "Whites Only" signs at roadside rest stops. But for all that, the clock seems to have stopped here, and every mile is steeped in memory.

Moses once described Mississippi as "the middle of the iceberg." No other state so defiantly hoisted segregation as its banner; no other state so openly used the sheriff's badge, the lynch mob and the burning cross to enforce it. "Mississippi set itself up to be our destiny," Moses says. "And so it attracted what it eventually got: us."

Moses arrived alone in 1960. Dennis rolled in a year later on the first busload of Freedom Riders to go into Mississippi, a daring crusade to break the South's color bar. In 1964, together with a band of young activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Moses and Dennis embarked on a historic drive to teach Mississippi blacks about their constitutional rights and register them to vote.

Only a case of bronchitis prevented Dennis from meeting Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, civil rights workers, at a bombed-out church in Neshoba County on June 21, 1964. He has never quite shaken a sense of responsibility for their deaths, or forgotten the horror uncovered in the search for their bodies: other corpses, of black men mutilated beyond recognition, caught on snags in Mississippi rivers.

But Mississippi holds more than nightmares for Dennis, who went on to become a successful lawyer in New Orleans. He recalls the deep affection the activists had for each other, the revolution of hope they inspired and the work they left undone. "When I left Mississippi," Dennis says, "I felt that there was a part of me missing. I didn't finish something."

MOSES SAYS HE, TOO, LEFT PART OF his soul in Mississippi.

Raised in the Harlem River Houses in New York, he had been a Harvard Ph.D. candidate in philosophy and was a middle-school math teacher when news of the lunch-counter sit-in movement drew him south in 1960. In Atlanta he met Ella Baker, director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, godmother of SNCC and a fierce believer in the power of common people to move mountains.

With Baker's backing, Moses set out on a solitary tour of rural Mississippi, written off by most civil rights leaders as too dangerous to organize. By 1961, he was registering blacks to vote in towns where few had dared to claim even their most basic rights. Exhibiting almost mystical calm in the face of terrible violence, the soft-spoken young man quickly became a legend.

When a sheriff's cousin gashed his head open with a knife handle, a badly bleeding Moses still managed to stagger up the courthouse steps to register two black farmers. Seemingly oblivious to danger, he fell asleep in a SNCC office where only hours before workers had leaped out a window to escape an armed mob of local whites. And in Greenwood, when three Klansmen opened fire on his car, Moses grabbed the steering wheel with one hand, cradled the bleeding driver with the other and somehow managed to bring the careening car to a halt.

Arrested and jailed countless times, he resisted his growing "Moses" reputation -- going so far as to change his name to Parris, his mother's maiden name. But his exploits fed the legend. "In Mississippi, Bob Moses was the equivalent of Martin Luther King," says Taylor Branch, author of "Parting the Waters," a Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the early civil rights movement.

Moses' insistence on Socratic reasoning and bottom-up organizing, which often dragged SNCC meetings late into the night, alternately inspired and maddened his colleagues. "Bob combines Calvinist, absolute certainty with a deep commitment to democracy and poor folks," says a longtime friend, the Rev. James Breeden. "He can be the most charming, open guy you'll ever want to meet or a totally inside-himself, enigmatic mystic. But one rarely runs into such an implacable being."

After Freedom Summer, however, something snapped. He watched in pain as SNCC's interracial "Beloved Community" fractured in a season of violence that left 4 people dead and 80 beaten, and 67 churches, homes and businesses destroyed. "That summer," Moses says, "people who were talking to each other stopped. People who had been working together left. The whole spectrum of race relations compressed, broke down and washed us away."

Moses' personal life, too, lost its moorings. His marriage to Dona Richard, a SNCC worker, ended in divorce. And as he grew more actively opposed to the Vietnam War, Federal authorities -- who hadn't accepted his claim of conscientious objection -- drafted him. In 1966, Moses fled to Canada. For two years he lived under an assumed name and scraped by with a medley of jobs. Finally, Moses and his second wife, Janet Jemmott, a former SNCC activist, moved to a dusty village in Tanzania, where they lived for eight years.

It was a good time to be away. Assassinations, the war, racial polarization: "I was glad to miss it all," Moses says. "It was a good time to duck. The notion that you can fight everything is crazy." Instead, he taught high-school math, raised four children and gradually recovered from the "deep sea pressure" of Mississippi. "You just felt like you were underwater all the time."

IN 1976, AFTER 10 YEARS in exile, Moses returned. Janet entered medical school, and he resumed his doctoral studies at Harvard. But he was soon distracted. Unhappy with the math instruction his eldest daughter, Maisha, was receiving at Martin Luther King Jr. School in Cambridge, Moses insisted on tutoring her at home.

"Doing math with my dad was part of our responsibility in the family," Maisha recalls, "like taking out the garbage or doing laundry." By 1982, however, Maisha was in open revolt about learning math at home, instead of with her schoolmates. So when her eighth-grade teacher invited Moses to come in and teach algebra, he followed his daughter to school.

It was the end of his doctoral studies and the beginning of the Algebra Project. Freed from financial burdens by a MacArthur

Foundation "genius" grant, Moses turned his full attention to teaching -- and watching. Some found his beetle-browed gaze unsettling. Mary Lou Mehrling, Maisha's teacher, recalls one frightened little girl running out of the classroom in tears. "His steady, constant demands, that intensity, just unnerved her," Mehrling says, laughing. "And it unnerved us!"

But all that watching paid off. Moses noted that children had difficulty moving from an arithmetic understanding of numbers -- usually associated with the question "How much?" -- to the more flexible algebraic concept, which requires an additional question: "Which way?"

Getting the right answer wasn't the point, Moses realized. Students needed to puzzle their way to the right questions, then chart out a variety of solutions. Watching children distill lessons from concrete experiences, he created a five-step model that reproduced their natural learning process. In an Algebra Project exercise, a child experiences an event, draws or models it, writes and talks about it, translates it into mathematical language and then develops symbols to represent it.

Moses came to believe that even tricky mathematical concepts like negative numbers, which make little sense to children but are critical in algebra, could be more readily explained if linked to everyday applications. He scouted around Cambridge for a simple, vivid example and found one staring him in the face: the Red Line in nearby Central Square.

Herding his students into a subway car, Moses took them inbound to Boston, then back past Central Square to the end of the line in Cambridge. Back in class, armed with magic markers, students assigned a value of zero to the Central Square station. Soon they had transformed the train route into a number line with positive values for inbound stops, negative for outbound.

Students got the point, a fun ride and a chance to make art out of numbers. One boy who used to hide behind a piano during math class emerged. Groans diminished. Resistance ebbed. Soon Moses was experimenting with other ways to teach algebraic concepts:

zodiac games to teach multiplication and division and lemonade concentrate to teach ratios.

Moses next began a series of weekend tutorials for parents and breakfast workshops for children who needed it. Not everyone was thrilled. "It was like torture," says Claude Sneed, now 19, whose mother roused him from sleep for those 7:30 A.M. sessions. "I know for myself, whenever math time came around I got a sick feeling in my stomach. They worked us hard."

But Sneed sailed through the ninth-grade qualifying test for honors math and moved directly into the sequence of geometry, trigonometry and precalculus. Even those who didn't pass advanced to honors algebra, which is still on the college-prep track. Today Sneed is an electrical-engineering student at Northeastern University. Maisha Moses is a Harvard graduate and Algebra Project developer in Oakland. And the King school is using project techniques in every grade from kindergarten to eighth.

Moses has just begun to assess his project's long-term impact; as yet, there is insufficient data to judge its success. But anecdotal information and standardized tests from several schools appear to confirm what Algebra Project teachers have long suspected: "When these kids get the privilege of creating their own mathematics, they become independent learners," says Dorothy Strong, director of mathematics for the Chicago public schools. "And that works on the whole child."

The best example is the King School, where the program has been in place for 10 years. Before the Algebra Project, few students took the optional advanced-placement qualifying test in ninth grade, and virtually none passed. By 1991, the school's graduates ranked second in Cambridge on the test.

In Chicago, parents emboldened by a citywide school reform movement imported math Moses-style into 19 elementary schools, beginning in 1990. Several skeptical teachers resisted, but last year many students showed marked improvement in reading and writing as well as in math. And in Louisville, Ky., one principal credits the project with nearly doubling the number of students who scored at or

above the 50th percentile on a national math achievement test.

News of the project's success spread quickly. Soon schools in Boston, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Oakland and San Francisco jumped on board. Reports trickled south, but Moses -- already leapfrogging across the north to personally train every Algebra Project teacher -- gave little thought to expanding there.

Then "Mississippi Burning," Alan Parker's 1988 film about the murder of the three civil rights workers, stirred long-repressed anger. Outraged at what they considered the film's distortions, and particularly galled by its heroic depiction of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, former activists held a symposium in Jackson. Their informal title: "Why Was Mississippi Burning and Who Put Out the Fire?"

It was a wrenching reunion; Dennis had not seen Moses for 24 years. "For us to come together again after a white man makes a crazy movie is insanity," Dennis said that day, his voice choked with emotion. "We have to get back in here. We've got a lot of stuff that's unfinished."

Dennis spoke about the tongue-lashing he'd got from the aging Mississippi firebrand Annie Devine. "Mrs. Devine compared Bob and me to runaway fathers. She said: 'You gave birth and you left, and you haven't done anything to support your children.' " Dennis paused, laughed through his tears and said, "Maybe that's what's been nagging me for so many years."

Rising at dawn, the men spoke for hours by the edge of a Jackson motel pool, and when they parted they still had 10 years to fill in. Both had remarried, both had children to brag about. But Moses kept coming back to the same thing: the Algebra Project. It's the future, he said. And it's the legacy of our past.

Moses pointed to the example of their late friend Fannie Lou Hamer of Sunflower County in Mississippi. Hamer was 44 when she learned she had the right to vote. But encouraged by SNCC, the plantation worker rose to become one of the movement's most eloquent and savvy leaders. And when, in televised testimony at the 1964

Democratic National Convention, she passionately demanded an end to all-white delegations, she shook the conscience of the nation.

"Immersing everyone in the process, insisting that everyone get in there and do it, accelerated the development of leadership," Moses told Dennis. "Here, you immerse the child in a physical event he understands, and show that child how to take from that event the mathematics he needs. It's the same process that raised someone like Fannie Lou Hamer until she could speak to the whole country."

Last year, Dennis left his law practice and moved to Jackson with his wife, Carolyn, and two youngest children to coordinate the Algebra Project's Southern Initiative. He now administers programs in Louisiana, Kentucky, Arkansas and Mississippi, where he hopes to put some old demons to rest.

"Coming back to Mississippi, you see what you left," Dennis says over a hasty cup of tea in Greenwood. "Yes, there's been progress. But then you wonder what direction that is going in. There still is no format for saving the children."

BUT IN Greenwood itself, and in Sunflower and Washington Counties to the west, seeds planted by the Algebra Project are beginning to bear fruit for more than 2,000 Delta schoolchildren in 10 area schools. Inside Thelma McGee's classroom in Indianola, children are sprawled on the floor, under their desks, drawing on butcher paper, debating in groups, writing stories -- doing everything, in short, you wouldn't expect them to do in a sixth-grade math class.

McGee, a sweet-tempered woman who keeps a Bible on her desk for personal reference, answers an inquiry here and there but lets her young charges answer most of their own questions. "It's embarrassing to ask your teacher," explains Robert Kent, a lean, serious boy with metal-rimmed glasses and a gray sweatsuit. "But you can ask your friends. They're trustworthy."

On the walls are drawings of their recent bus tour through town: the courthouse, National Guard armory, fire station, airport and graveyard. One boy's cemetery has a gravestone with "JoJo" written across it. "He's an imaginary friend," explains a squirming Davis

Willis. Next are slightly more abstract renderings of the trip, with directional symbols of the students' own design. The idea, says McGee, is to acquaint children with numerical equivalents for distance, direction, time and space in their own living, breathing environment.

Moses' "transitional curriculum" for sixth graders is designed to introduce students gently to concepts they will need later in algebra. Children draw, write and discuss their ideas in small, cooperative teams and concoct stories from their own experience that illustrate mathematical concepts. "Mostly you have to talk about it before you're ready to solve the problem," Robert Kent says, drawing vigorous nods of agreement from his teammates.

Getting children to talk to each other about math is exactly what Moses intends. There's no need, he says, to teach children better ways to compute. "Today, drill and practice doesn't take you front and center," he says. "Computers can crunch more numbers than anyone's going to dream of crunching. There are no jobs out there for people who know how to divide."

Educators say his approach flips traditional math instruction, often used to filter out weaker students, on its head. "Seeing mathematics as a language leads naturally to the assumption that everyone can learn to be math literate," says Claudia Henrion, a Middlebury College math professor working to reform high-school and college teaching. "We would never say to a student: 'Sorry, you're not bright enough to learn English.' "

And an observer doesn't have to look far to find the echo of Fannie Lou Hamer in McGee's classroom. "I think that I am good at math since we started the Algebra Project," says Shemetric Falconer, a slender girl in a pink T-shirt and jeans. "I can grow up and get a job and be good at this stuff."

Shemetric, who last year wanted no part of school at all -- and was considered at risk for dropping out -- now says she wants to teach algebra. "She's gradually coming out of her shell," McGee says. "They sit there and explain things to each other, so she's beginning to feel more comfortable."

Moses wants students to discover their own mathematical thinking. So rather than taking an abstract approach to concepts like equivalency -- the idea that one-half is equivalent to five-tenths, even though it doesn't look a thing like it -- the Algebra Project asks students to write "make-do" parables that demonstrate equivalencies in real life. In Thelma McGee's classroom, children write about substituting baking soda for toothpaste, flour for pancake mix and liver for fishing bait.

Equivalence, any theoretician will attest, is a fundamental concept of modern mathematics and a stepping stone to higher math. Moses makes it child's play. Using snap-together cubes, Play-Doh, jump ropes and Chinese zodiac restaurant menus, Moses has found ways to introduce even such difficult notions as displacement, integers and vectors. "It gets harder as you go along," confides another student. "But it seems like they cover it up by making it fun."

Rural reality does pose problems for the Algebra Project's urban-based curriculum. Since there are no subways, teachers use a bus route for the number-line exercise, and students pick their own landmarks.

Often Algebra Project bus tours teach more than just math. During a recent training, one white teacher on a bus full of educators pointed out the former site of Greenwood's swimming pool. Her grandfather built the pool, she said. And in the 1960's, when the town was ordered to let black people swim there, her father was one of the men who poured it full of concrete.

OF COURSE, MISSISSIPPI *has* changed since Bob Moses and Dave Dennis left. Blacks, who constitute 36 percent of the population -- the highest concentration in any Southern state -- now occupy nearly a quarter of the seats in the State Legislature. And in the former heartland of the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizens Councils, overt racism is no longer in vogue. Moses, who once slept on the floors of those bold enough to give him shelter, is greeted politely by white clerks at Greenwood's Best Western motel when he comes to town.

But Greenwood's blacks still live apart from whites, separated by the traditional dividing line: railroad tracks. The Magnolia State leads the nation in poverty, infant mortality and illiteracy. And its schools are still segregated.

In 1970, as court-ordered desegregation plans went into effect, Mississippi's dual public school system simply changed form. It became, for the most part, a black-public, white-private system, as predominantly white institutions like Pillow Academy in Greenwood sprang up overnight. The educational legacy of Jim Crow still cripples the Delta's black populace. Into the mid-60's, the black school year was substantially shortened by white administrators more concerned with the cotton crop than with educating black children. That shortchange, coupled with agricultural mechanization and a virtually nonexistent industrial base, has mired Delta blacks in illiteracy and unemployment.

For too long, says Howard Sanders, superintendent of schools in Hollandale, black parents have told their children to leave Mississippi and "never look back." The Delta's calcified, semifeudal economy left aspiring young blacks little choice. Now he and local business leaders are looking to the Algebra Project to lay the groundwork for economic revival.

Visions of economic renewal have attracted whites as well as blacks. Rebecca Baird, a plucky teacher from Williamsburg, Ky., hopes to lure corporations to her depressed coal town with the promise of a math-literate work force. "We're trying to train our kids so we can compete with bigger cities," says Baird, who attended a recent Algebra Project training in New Orleans. Her school district is offering free videos, fast food or T-shirts to kids who sign up. Baird calls it stealth learning: "They'll learn without realizing they're learning."

Other Southern whites have embraced the Algebra Project for reasons that have little to do with civil rights or economic development. Debbie Murphy is a blond, blue-eyed daughter of the Confederacy. She grew up in the small Delta town of Ruleville, attended an all-white private academy and didn't realize until her first day of college at Ole Miss "that this was not a segregated world."

Murphy never heard of Hamer, who lived on the black side of Ruleville, until the day she died.

But Murphy went on to become a public-school math teacher. She's committed to teaching at Lockard, an integrated school in Indianola. And what draws her to the Algebra Project is that it works. At first, she admits, she was far from convinced. "I was very, very skeptical," she says. "But I just fell into it. It was so easy. They learn from each other."

"Mrs. Murphy, can we break into our groups, *please?*" asks one insistent girl. Murphy nods, and the classroom explodes with activity. Teams of students measure the floor, Murphy's desk and the windows, using rolls of tape, books, pieces of chalk or just their own feet. "One-two-three-four" mutters one youngster atop a table. "Before, they could just sit there and ignore the teacher," Murphy says. "But they can't ignore this." The one drawback? As the math class files out, a girl from Murphy's incoming class surveys the scene. "It's messy," she sniffs.

BOB MOSES HAS WATCHED WITH satisfaction as the Delta Project has grown and flourished. But he never forgets the way things were. "It's interesting to work with teachers who 30 years ago you couldn't talk to," he muses one afternoon in Dennis's backyard. "There was no way even to approach them."

Mississippi has extended a bittersweet homecoming to the veterans and offspring of Freedom Summer. Nightmares still stalk Dave Dennis's nights, but his days are filled with ever-expanding plans to reform Southern education. Ben Moynihan found no trace of his parents, but discovered blood ties to a fiercely loving family. "I know whose boy you are," MacArthur Cotton, a former SNCC activist, said to him one night in Dennis's Jackson home. "You belong to us."

Next year, Cotton hopes to hold a Mississippi reunion to mark the 30th anniversary of Freedom Summer. Many would make the pilgrimage, for that distant summer was the defining moment of their lives. But others never recovered from the terrible violence unleashed against them, and for them there can be no homecoming. Some are alcoholics on the streets where they all once marched, some are in

jail and at least one woman has been in a mental institution. "Some of us didn't survive psychologically through this," Dennis says. "When the movement moved on these people were left behind, like the M.I.A.'s from the Vietnam War."

Moses, off to yet another training session, grabs his backpack, extends a warm hand in farewell and climbs back into Dennis's blue van. "It's taken a quarter of a century to move through this," he says with a small smile. "But it may be that the times are ready."

THE COLLEGE-BOARD METHOD: MATH AS THE GATEKEEPER

THE CREATORS OF THE scholastic Aptitude Test -- the much-feared college entrance exam -- have decided to assist students who might otherwise fall off the college-prep track. "I believe in elite education for the non-elite," says Donald M. Stewart, president of the College Board, in New York City. "Having spent a lot of time defining and raising standards, we have decided to help students meet those standards."

The board's response: Equity 2000, an attempt to close the college-bound gap between white and minority students by the end of the century. The two-year-old program, now involving more than 450,000 students in 200 schools across the nation, eliminates middle-school tracking, insures that every ninth grader learns algebra and trains teachers in the most effective techniques for math instruction.

Why focus on math? "Math is the gatekeeper to the academic track," says Stewart. In a recent study, the board found that minority students who mastered algebra and geometry in high school succeeded in college at almost the same rate as white students. But many black and Hispanic students are still tracked into dead-end math classes.

"Once a child becomes remedial, they never get 'fixed,' " says Anthony Terceira, math administrator for the Providence, R.I., school system, one of six Equity 2000 sites. "And it does a lot of harm to

children's attitudes."

Call it consumer math, business math or vocational math, it all comes down to "a cruel hoax," says Equity 2000's national director, Vinetta Jones. "But you can't just by edict say: 'Thou Shalt Not Track,' " she adds. "You've got to provide training."

Equity 2000's summer workshops show teachers and guidance counselors how to reach all students with new materials and teaching styles. In Providence, school administrators have eliminated math tracking in every grade, from first on up. And next September, they plan to enroll every eighth grader in pre-algebra, every ninth grader in algebra and every 10th grader in geometry. Schools at the other sites -- Fort Worth, Milwaukee, Nashville, San Jose, Calif., and Prince George's County, Md. -- are setting similar goals.

Still, many teachers and parents wonder how they can de-track their schools without boring the bright kids and overwhelming the slower learners. The answer, say experts, is to raise the floor without capping the ceiling. In Providence, quicker learners advance through math at their own rate; those who need more help to reach Equity 2000 thresholds receive after-school help.

Most important, says Terceira, emphasis has switched from workbooks to creative thinking. Two years ago, seventh-grade students sat in six rows of five desks, alternately staring at their teachers, the clock and their work sheets. Today, they're huddled in small groups, gripping rubber dolls and animatedly debating the height ratio of Beauty to the Beast. And in the upper grades, lessons start with real-life problems rather than abstract concepts.

"The old thing we always heard was: 'I'm never going to use this stuff,' " says Terceira. "That's true. You are never going to get a job where you are paid to open to page 256 and do those 15 factoring problems. Nobody's making money doing that except teachers."

GRAPHIC: Photos: Bob Moses has returned to Mississippi with new equations for empowerment. Algebra Project students in Indianola, Miss., learn about substitution by taking a measurement first with their feet, then with a yardstick, and comparing results.

(Photographs by Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times)(pg. 28); Belle measures up: Equity 2000 students check the height of a "Beauty and the Beast" doll. (Seth Resnick for The New York Times); Moses, center, at a SNCC office in March 1963. In those days Moses' curriculum -- black-voter registration -- got him beaten and jailed. (Danny Lyon/Magnum)(pg. 30); Moses at a teacher training session at Xavier University in New Orleans. His method emphasizes math as a language, not as number-crunching. Algebra Project students demonstrate their skills at Mississippi State University. (pg. 31); Ben Moynihan, an Algebra Project trainer, looked for his family in Mississippi but instead found his roots. The rhythms of math: Algebra Project instructors use African drumming to teach students about ratios. (pg. 32); Bob Moses with a teacher and a student in Cambridge, Mass. The Algebra Project was born there in 1982 after Moses insisted on tutoring his daughter in math. (pg. 51)(Photographs by Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times)

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