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# Is Math The Path To Equality?

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## Civil Rights Icon Bob Moses And The Algebra Project Seek To Fight Income Inequality By Providing Equal Access To Math Education

### MT IN DEPTH

By **Stephanie Sparer**

Modern Times Magazine

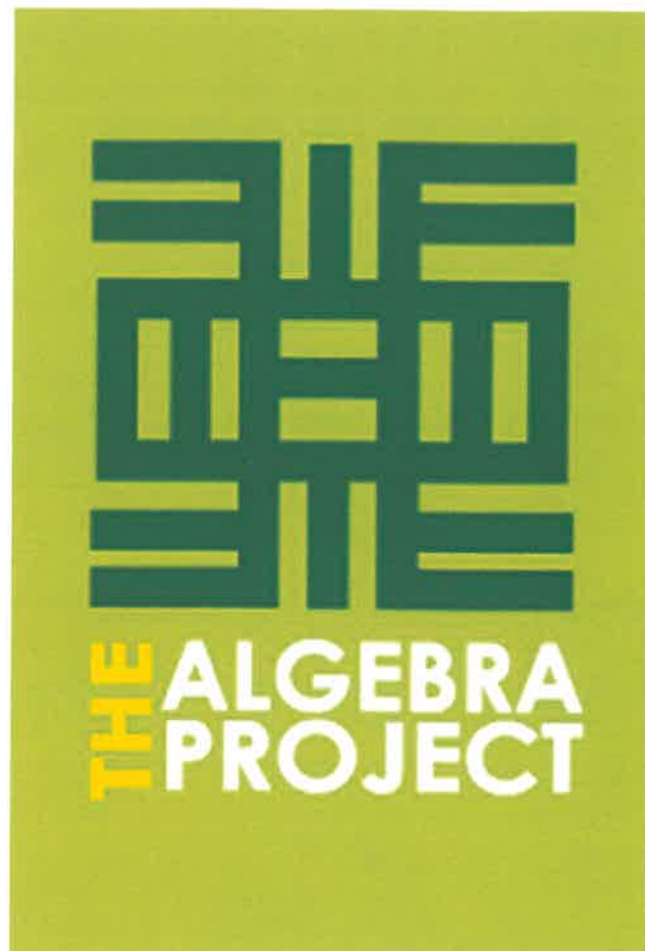
March 3, 2016 — If you've watched any political debate recently, no matter which side you're rooting for, you might hear about the nation's looming concerns about wealth inequality and the ever expanding racial wealth gap. It's a tale as old as time, but the topic remains current, especially during election season.

CNN declared in October of 2015 that, "Reducing income inequality is at the center of Democratic presidential frontrunners campaigns," and every town hall meeting has presidential hopefuls boasting that they would be the ones to boost middle class Americans into, well, actually being middle class. These candidates believe the wealth gap ends where education begins. It's why Bernie Sanders has been giving stump speeches promising free education and why, in-between questions about emails and paid speeches, Clinton has been toying with investing more federal dollars in scientific research.

It's like that Francis Bacon line goes: knowledge is power.

But what if you don't have any power? Who's going to stand up for you?

That's where Robert Moses comes in. Moses proposed the idea of education as freedom from wealth inequality and the path to middle class long before Bernie and Hillary got behind a podium to debate each other about it. However, Moses isn't running for anything, though you might recognize his name from a history book since he was a key figure in the Civil Right's movement, working right alongside historic greats such as Ella Baker and Dr.



Martin Luther King. With their help, and the help of many others, Moses began the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which fought for the right to live under the belief that *all men are created equal* by organizing voter registration drives, sit-ins, freedom rides and the 1963 March on Washington.

Harlem raised, Robert Moses, now 81, has a long-standing habit of developing committees and organizations that help people change their entire lives for the better. Moses sees math as one way to gain access to a full life, stressing in an interview on the PBS show, *Horizonté* that, “Math is available as an organizing tool around the issue of education in the same way that voting was an organizing tool for political access.”

This thought propelled the creation of The Algebra Project, a national, nonprofit organization that began in 1982 and emphasizes teaching algebra to minority students and cultivating a sense of community. The program works by using math to generate a space where teachers can collaborate with parents and students to create a safer environment with room for students to grow. What many people don't understand is that without The Algebra Project, learning math, an opportunity many kids dread, isn't even a right, it's a privilege many minority students won't even get.

Soon however, minority students won't be the minority anymore. They'll be the norm. The latest census shows close to half of people younger than 18 in Arizona are black, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, or multiracial — i.e. not white — and if you believe the countless reports released every year (and you should), this affects school funding in a devastating way. Data scientist David Mosenkis' 2015 study of 500 school districts in the state of Pennsylvania found that school districts with more white students have significantly higher funding than those with minority students.

This finding was not a huge surprise if you're Harvard-educated Moses who, when his own daughter didn't have an Algebra I class offered at her Cambridge, Mass., public middle school, created one himself. The small class he taught his daughter and three of her friends quickly developed into the organized community outreach program he called The Algebra Project. The organization is currently in more than 20 urban and rural communities in Louisiana, South Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, Florida, Minnesota, and New York helping more than 40,000 children become literate in math.

Moses visited Arizona earlier in February to introduce The Algebra Project to the state.

“Everyone who lives in this country and takes it as their home has a right to enter into the

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constitutional conversation,” Moses said in an interview with José Cárdenas on PBS, “We need to raise the level of the issue of the conversation about education to the level of the constitution.”

Moses asserts that a full mathematics education for every child in America, regardless of economic status or color is like having complete U.S. citizenship. “We believe that every child has a right to a quality education to succeed in this technology-based society and to exercise full citizenship,” The Algebra Project website states. Moses argues that children with knowledge find themselves asking more not just of themselves, but of the system that’s failing them so greatly.

A Brandeis University study entitled *The Roots of the Widening Racial Wealth Gap: Explaining the Black-White Economic Divide* cites a 2009 representative survey of American households that revealed the median wealth of white families was \$113,149 compared to that of \$6,325 for Latino families and \$5,677 for black families. Historically speaking, and backed by the Brandeis University study, such “toxic inequality” has been “perpetuated by policies and tax preferences that continue to favor the affluent.”

The study found that the wealth gap begins with bad policy and the lack of opportunity while placing barriers in workplaces, schools, and communities that “reinforce deeply entrenched racial dynamics in how wealth is accumulated.” This forms a vicious cycle generation after generation.

Moses, who won the MacArthur Fellowship for his ongoing work on the Algebra Project, sees mathematical literacy as the way to break through this kind of economic discrepancy. He sees participation in algebra as the access bridge to a good future. The slogan for the Algebra Project is simple, but to the point, “If we can teach students algebra in the middle school years, then we should do it.”

But in a world where the Civil Rights era is supposedly over (don’t believe the hype), the Algebra Project really is a project. Students must get excited enough to rally their parents, who in turn take to the schools which then urge community leaders to take a stand in the matter. It’s a lot of hoops to jump through just so disadvantaged children are provided with equal education. Like the sit-ins at the lunch counter and the marches in Washington in the 60s, this is a grassroots campaign and it’s working even if the idea seems impossible or too big to ever succeed.

But, luckily, Moses is an expert at this kind of thing.

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