

public school bureaucracies—was growing rapidly, especially in California. But no one knew if they were doing much good. Fuller worried that their popularity foretold the disintegration of the public school system and the sense of community that was a vital part of growing up in America.

In this book Fuller offers six essays—as much works of journalism as they are academic pieces—on six very different charter school experiments. University of San Francisco

Professor Patty Yancey looks at the growth of the El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Academy in Lansing, Michigan. Teachers and graduate students Edward Wexler and Luis Huerta recount the difficult history of the Latino Amigos Charter Academy near Oakland. *New York Times* reporter Kate Zernicke describes the creation of a charter school in an affluent suburb of Boston. UCLA Professor Amy Stuart Wells and research associates Jennifer Jellison Holme and Ash Vasudeva probe the difficulties of a wealthy Southern California suburb that created a charter school and invited in transfer students from less affluent minority neighborhoods. Huerta tells how Sierra foothill Christians and Bay Area libertarians produced a charter school for homeschoolers. And California State University, Humboldt, Professor Eric Rofes relates the bizarre story of how farmers and teachers in depressed rural Minnesota created a school organized as a cooperative.

Fuller deftly ties the grab-bag together with his own opening and closing thoughts on the philosophical and political tension between allowing free-thinkers to experiment and maintaining a community commitment to free and equitable education for all. “In experimenting with radical decentralization, we must avoid eroding the basic tenets of civil society in ways that weaken the state’s ability to attack the underlying causes of low achievement and mediocre public schools,” he says. “If charter schools prove not to be an effective piece in the school reform puzzle but only a colorful distraction, we will have squandered the energy of

many engaged parents and teachers, and the democratic state’s unifying spirit will have been diminished.”

The impression left by these case studies fits the research so far: Charter school children, as a whole, are not doing any better than similar children in regular schools. Nor is there much evidence that the growth of charter schools is making regular schools better. Charter-school advocates have long said that regular schools would be forced to respond to the competitive pressure, but regular-school improvements in recent years seem largely motivated by new state learning standards and tests, not the new charter schools in the neighborhood.

The book provides a useful benchmark for a movement that in many ways is just getting started. Fuller places its beginning in 1988, when American Federation of Teachers President Al Shanker first publicized the ideas of educational innovator Ray Budde. There are some disquieting insights, such as the fact that the charter schools with the most disadvantaged students seem to have the greatest organizational and financial problems. But the book also offers some fresh ideas, like the Minnesota New Country School profiled by Rofes.

In September 1994, the charter school opened in two storefronts in Le Sueur, Minn., with 75 students. Instead of the four teachers being employees of the local school district or of the company running the school, the usual charter school set-up, they were organized as the EdVisions teacher cooperative, inspired by agricultural cooperatives of that area. They were the legal owners of the educational program of the school, free to sell their time and expertise to others as they saw fit.

The book indicates such innovative approaches are not the rule in every charter school. Some traditional teaching is done because that is what the parents and faculty want. But it is hard to imagine experiments like EdVisions being launched anywhere but a charter. One can hope, however, that radical decentralization, whatever its flaws, will serve as a laboratory for

a variety of original devices that all schools may someday find useful.

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Math Sheik

By David J. Garrow

BOB MOSES IS ONE OF THE most famous veterans of the Southern black freedom struggle. A legendary organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Moses headed up SNCC’s work in Mississippi and was the guiding force behind the 1964 “Freedom Summer” project that culminated in the unsuccessful effort to seat an integrated Mississippi delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. Soon after that defeat, Moses left SNCC and moved, first to Canada, and then to Tanzania, remaining away from the United States until 1977.

Both in the years before he joined the Southern struggle and during his years in Tanzania, Bob Moses worked as a math teacher. Once he returned to the states, Moses re-entered the Harvard Ph.D. program he had dropped out of 20 years earlier. When he expressed disappointment with the insufficiently challenging level of mathematics instruction his eldest daughter was receiving in the eighth grade of a Cambridge public school in 1982, her teacher responded by inviting Moses to become a volunteer algebra instructor in her classroom.

Thanks in part to an unsolicited five-year grant from the MacArthur Foundation, Moses used his voluntary teaching as a springboard toward building what by the mid-1980s was officially christened “The Algebra Project”: a program designed to allow all high school students access to college-prep level mathematics by introducing them to the principles of algebra during the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.

Radical Equations is the story of how the Algebra Project has developed and expanded over the past 15 years. Written primarily by Moses’s one-time SNCC colleague Charles E.

**INSIDE CHARTER SCHOOLS:
The Paradox of Radical Decentralization**
edited by Bruce Fuller
Harvard University Press, \$29.95

Cobb, Jr., the book details why Moses assigns such importance to middle-school algebra instruction and explains the powerful linkage Moses sees between a present-day mathematics curriculum that challenges students to devote themselves to academic schoolwork and the political-organizing legacy of the Mississippi voting-rights movement.

The first part of Moses' case is straightforward: "Economic access and full citizenship depend crucially on math and science literacy," yet in much of America, "illiteracy in math is acceptable the way that illiteracy in reading and writing is unacceptable." Moses's goal of making college-level mathematics accessible to all high school students is, however, only an initial step toward a broader agenda. "The Algebra Project is first and foremost an organizing project—a community organizing project—rather than a traditional program of school reform," he and Cobb emphasize.

Moses wants to motivate his young students to demand a first-rate education both from their communities and from themselves. *Radical Equations* frankly acknowledges "the huge problem we have in the schools," but goes on to describe how some of the young alumni of early Algebra Project classes are now having better success than their elders at recruiting other young people into the program. By making "algebra 'cool,' a hip thing for other young people," the small band of alumni are able to recruit "teenagers committed to after-school and weekend study at the expense of their regular pleasures." For Moses, the nascent political potential of this commitment is huge. "The only ones who can really demand the kind of education they need and the kind of changes needed to get it are the students, their parents, and their community," as distinct from simply "well-intentioned, 'radical' reformers." Can the young people "create a culture in which they begin to make a demand on themselves and then on the larger society?" Moses and Cobb ask.

Starting in 1992, the Algebra Pro-

ject began to focus much of its energies on Mississippi, and Moses recruited his one-time co-director of the 1964 Freedom Summer Project, David Dennis, to head up this new Mississippi project. In a foreword to *Radical Equations*, Dennis discusses how, in launching the Algebra Project in Mississippi: "We started with the kids. The kids then pulled in their

parents." This, of course, is exactly the same method that Moses used in 1961, when he first went to the southwest Mississippi town of McComb to initiate SNCC's organizing work in what was then the most dangerous Southern state. Dennis correctly

notes that "the 1960s movement in Mississippi and across the country was driven by the young people," and he and Moses clearly envision how the Algebra Project could serve as a political spark-plug. They would just need enough young people to become convinced that the quality of education that America's public schools afford them is an issue around which they and their families ought to organize.

Radical Equations traces the experiences that Algebra Project programs have had in a variety of American school districts and admits how "we have had our ups and downs with school administrations" all across the country. Moses himself now spends much of his time teaching in a Jackson, Mississippi, middle school not far from where his one-time Mississippi colleague Medgar W. Evers was assassinated in 1963. Moses remains a soft-spoken and ascetic figure, someone whose entire movement experience has taught him that encouraging people to articulate their own demands is a far more profound and radical course of action than telling them what is in their own best interest. Now, 40 years after he first went to McComb, Bob Moses's upper-most principle of teaching and organizing remains what it was then: "Work with people and leadership will emerge."

DAVID J. GARROW is the Presidential Distinguished Professor at Emory University's School of Law.

Trading Places

By Jennifer Bradley

IN 1956, ECONOMIST CHARLES Tiebout published a short article introducing the notion of "the consumer-voter," a person who chooses where to live based on local government services and the taxes levied to pay for them. His idea was powerful and, as the suburban era continued its crescendo, it applied to more and more Americans. People were shopping for entirely new communities, not just nicer apartments.

And, particularly if they were white, people had a lot of choices. Cities in the 1950s were morphing into large metropolitan areas. Cheap mortgages and new highways allowed people to break, or at least loosen, the tight link between the jurisdictions in which they lived and the ones in which they worked.

The New Geography presents readers with what happens when Tiebout's consumer-voter meets the technological realities of e-mail and cell phones. The links between work and home become, if not more tenuous, certainly more complicated, and the choices available to talented, educated people multiply exponentially. Where you work is now largely determined by where you want to live, rather than vice versa. This ability to choose widely, based not on Tiebout's package of local government services, but on a much broader set of lifestyle criteria, is "reshaping the American landscape."

Although the book's author, Joel Kotkin, a right-wing-ish academic and commentator, does not mention Tiebout, he is drawn to Tiebout's basic theory. Kotkin fervently believes in the power of basic economic concepts to explain sweeping social trends. His long list of professional affiliations also suggests a certain ideological bent. Kotkin is a fellow at Pepperdine University's public policy school, at the libertarian-minded Reason Public Policy Institute, and at the Milken Institute. He also works as a newspaper columnist and "director of content" at a high-tech venture-capital firm. In other words, he is a very successful entrepreneur of ideas, and entrepreneurial folks like him populate his book.

RADICAL EQUATIONS: Math, Literacy, and Civil Rights

by Bob Moses and
Charles E. Cobb, Jr.
Beacon Press, \$21.00