

# Stand and Deliver Aftermath

*The treatment of this brilliant teacher highlights much that is wrong with public schooling.*

By Jerry Jesness

Thanks to the popular 1988 movie *Stand and Deliver*, many people know of the success that Jaime Escalante and his students enjoyed at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles. During the 1980's, this exceptional teacher at a poor public school built a calculus program rivaled by only a handful of exclusive academies.

It is less well-known that Escalante left Garfield after problems with colleagues and administrators, and that his calculus program withered in his absence. That untold story highlights much that is wrong with public schooling.

Escalante's students surprised the nation in 1982 when 18 of them passed the Advanced Placement calculus exam. The Educational Testing Service found the scores suspect and asked 14 of the passing students to take the test again. Twelve agreed to do so (the other two decided they didn't need the credit for college), and all 12 did well enough to have their scores reinstated.

In the ensuing years, Escalante's calculus program grew phenomenally. In 1982, both enrollment in his classes and the number of students passing the AP calculus test more than doubled, with 33 taking the exam and 30 passing it. In 1987, 73 passed the test, and another 12 passed a more advanced version given after the second year of calculus.

By 1990, Escalante's math enrichment program involved over 400 students in classes ranging from beginning algebra to advanced calculus. In 1991, Escalante decided to leave Garfield. All his fellow math enrichment teachers soon left as well. By 1996, only 11 students passed the exam, down from a high of 85.

In any field but education, the combination of such a dramatic rise and such a precipitous fall would have invited analysis. The decline of Garfield's math program, however, went largely unnoticed.

## Movie Magic

The *Stand and Deliver* message, that the touch of a master could bring unmotivated students from arithmetic to calculus in a single year, was preached in schools throughout the nation. While the film did a great service by showing what students from disadvantaged backgrounds can achieve, the Hollywood fiction had at least one negative side effect.

The lessons of Escalante's patience and hard work in building his program, especially his attention to the classes that fed into calculus, were largely ignored in the faculty workshops and college education classes that routinely showed *Stand and Deliver* to their students.

How did Escalante attain such success at Garfield? One key factor was the support of his principal, Henry Gradillas. Gradillas reduced the number of basic math classes and came up with a requirement that those who take basic math must concurrently take algebra. He even braved the wrath of the community by denying extracurricular activities to entering students who failed basic skills tests and to current students who failed to maintain a C average.

Unlike the students in the movie, the real Garfield students required years of solid preparation before they could take calculus. So Escalante established a program at a local college where students could take math classes in intensive seven-week summer sessions. Escalante and Gradillas were also instrumental in getting the feeder schools to offer algebra to their students. To help make up for the lack of academic support available at home, Escalante established tutoring sessions before and after school.

Unfortunately, these lessons were lost on the education world. They were like physicians excited about a colleague who can cure cancer — without wanting to know how to replicate the feat!

Escalante's open admission policy, a major reason for his success, also paved the way for his departure. Calculus grew so popular at Garfield that classes grew beyond the 35-student limit set by the union contract. Some had more than 50 students.

Escalante would have preferred to keep the classes below the limit had he been able to do so without either denying calculus to willing students or using teachers who were not up to his high standards. Neither was possible. Rather than compromise, Escalante moved on.

Other problems had been brewing as well. After *Stand and Deliver* was released, Escalante became an overnight celebrity. The attention aroused feelings of jealousy, and in his last few years at Garfield, Escalante even received threats and hate mail. In 1990, he lost the math department chairmanship, the position that had enabled him to direct the pipeline.

In the process of raising academic standards at Garfield, the principal, Henry Gradillas, had made enemies. He took a sabbatical leave to finish his doctorate in 1987, hoping that upon his return he would either be reinstated as principal of Garfield or given a position from which he could help other schools. He was assigned to supervise asbestos removal.

Escalante remained at Garfield for four years after Gradillas' departure. Although he does not blame the ensuing administration for his own departure from the school, Escalante observes that Gradillas' replacement was more interested in things such as football and the marching band.

Escalante has retired to his native Bolivia where he teaches part time at the local university.

*(Adapted with permission from "Stand and Deliver Revisited," July 2002, [www.reason.com](http://www.reason.com). Mr. Jesness is a special education teacher in Texas' Lower Rio Grande Valley.)*