



He left no child behind

By Nancy McAllister

Jaime Escalante began teaching mathematics in 1974 to poor barrio teenagers at Garfield High School—an inner-city school in East Los Angeles that had typical urban troubles, including drugs and violence. Escalante recognized potential in all his students and had confidence in their abilities to excel. He fought fiercely to get them the textbooks and other materials they needed.

In 1982, a group of his students sat for the AP Calculus exam, a test that gives college credit for the subject to those who pass it. It was and remains a tough exam; only about 2 percent of high school students attempt it. When a large number of Escalante's students passed the exam, the results were called into question. No one else but Escalante could believe that so many seriously disadvantaged kids could pass the exam by their own means. They assumed that because the kids were poor minorities, it followed that the kids weren't very bright. To prove otherwise, most of Escalante's students who passed the exam agreed to take it again—and passed it a second time.

Escalante was hailed as a great teacher and his students continued to pass the AP Calculus exam over the years, thrusting the educator into the limelight. He won awards and became the host of an educational TV show for PBS. Many of his students went on

to prestigious careers in aerospace engineering and other mathematics-based jobs.

So what was the secret to Escalante's success? He says there really is no secret—that his students do well in difficult subjects because of a “time-honored tradition: hard work, and lots of it.” Escalante says that when students are expected to work hard, they almost always rise to the occasion and deliver. His bottom line: “If we expect kids to be losers, they will be losers; if we expect them to be winners, they will be winners. They rise, or fall, to the level of the expectations of those around them.”