

Educators Show It's Possible to Deliver Excellence

By Bill Hobby

A few years ago a movie called *Stand and Deliver* captured the imagination of the country. The movie told about a remarkable Los Angeles teacher named Jaime Escalante who taught underprivileged students at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles to excel in calculus and get into some of the best colleges in the country.

Escalante's students scored so high on the SAT that some school officials disbelieved the tests. He was accused of falsifying the results. He had not.

What Escalante had done was to believe that his students could succeed and excel and to inspire them to do it. Eventually educators around the country were convinced of what Escalante's students had achieved.

Grudgingly convinced, they were known to comment that "You run out of Jaime Escalantes pretty fast."

No doubt. But Texas has at least two of them: Thaddeus Lott and Paul Cain.

Thaddeus Lott is the principal of Wesley Elementary School in Houston. Paul Cain teaches computer mathematics at Ysleta High School near El Paso.

Wesley Elementary is a mostly black school on the north side of Houston. Ninety percent of its students are on a free or reduced-lunch program. Last year, PrimeTime Live told millions of viewers how Lott had built Wesley Elementary into a school that has bettered the rest of the Houston school district and the state on standardized tests.

At Wesley Elementary, Lott has no secret technique. Every student knows what is expected in terms of classroom participation and attention and behavior toward their teachers and each other. Sure and swift discipline enforces the expectation. Every teacher must commit to the demanding curriculum and to daily appraisal of the outcome their efforts.

Teachers and children are engaged, in the task at hand and with each other. Much of the class response is vocal and in unison, but far from sitting back and going with the flow, each child seems confident and eager to participate. The system of teaching is a highly structured phonics-based system called Distar.

The results are almost too good to be true, but they are. Just as happened in Los Angeles when Escalante's students grades were challenged, so Lott survived a trial by fire from a skeptical and hostile superintendent.

Ysleta High is in an old and decaying area southeast of El Paso. Most of its students are poor. Last year, five of its seniors were admitted to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The five were the largest group of Hispanics ever admitted to MIT from a large public high school. MIT rarely admits more than two students a year from the same public high school.

Roger Parks, the Ysleta principal, told the *New York Times*: "We're on the wrong side of the freeway. We are part of a community that has drugs, violence, and gangs... But we don't fit the stereotype." Other Ysleta graduates have attended Harvard, Yale, and Vassar.

One of the five, Lilibian Martinez, 17, spoke no English two years ago when she moved to Ysleta from Mexico, the *Times* reported.

Similar successes have been achieved by children of migrant workers through a program called CAMP, at St. Edward's University in Austin.

The College Assistance Migrant Program actively recruits children of migrant families, visiting high schools and social service agencies in areas of large migrant populations to encourage students and their families to commit to a college education and accept an often unsettling break with family tradition.

The state-federal program offers scholarships for the freshman year to high school graduates who have already beat the educational odds by overcoming a life on the road, difficulties with English and long hours in the fields after school.

Margarito Jimenez is the son of migrant parents, whose widowed mother counted on him from the age of eleven to support the family. Margarito learned English at sixteen, defied his relatives who told him he couldn't make it in the Anglo world, and followed the advice of a high school counsellor to apply for a CAMP scholarship. At St. Edward's University, Margarito has worked to pay his way while excelling academically and participating in a Community Mentor Program which matched him with an illiterate third grader. By participating in her achievement, he has found his life work.

Patterning himself on one of his heroes, Jaime Escalante, his goal is to carry the excitement and the opportunities of education to migrant children in whom he sees himself. He knows what is possible. If your schools do not measure up to these standards, maybe you should ask why.