November 2002 -- Jerry Jesness has written an interesting essay on Jaime Escalante. It is titled "Stand and Deliver Revisited," and it is subtitled "The untold story behind the famous rise -- and shameful fall -- of Jaime Escalante, America's master math teacher." As most people know, Jaime Escalante taught calculus to high school students who were attending a high school which did not offer such subjects and which did not expect its students to be able to succeed at such difficult courses. His struggle to succeed was memorialized in the movie Stand and Deliver.

The article details what happened to him, and it is well worth reading. I have some problems with the article, because it seems to proceed from the premise that Mr. Escalante was always right while everyone else was not. I don't have much trouble believing that he ran into a bureaucracy that did not want to be bothered with him, but Mr. Jesness seems to indict both the administrators who would not allow his supportive principal to return to his high school and the person who replaced the principal, but also his colleagues and the union.

I have some expertise in union affairs, and I can say that this part of the article shows a real lack of understanding with the problems unions have with rules violations. What happened was that Mr. Escalante became a victim of his own success: he did not have enough capable teachers to teach the number of students who wanted to take his courses, and since the school would not provide them, he tried to get around the contractual class size limits. It was this that the union objected to, and it caused Mr. Esclante to leave the program he had created. In the writer's words, "Why was the union imposing its 'help' on someone who hadn't requested it?"

There is an answer to that. When contracts are violated, even for the best of reasons, all sorts of mischief can occur. The class size limits of 35 are there to protect the students in everyone's classes, and allowing the contract to be violated in an individual case will often encourage predatory administrators to intimidate other teachers into allowing the same violations. It also encourages the school board to use such examples as reasons why class size limits are not needed. Furthermore, Mr. Escalante could have compromised on his open admissions policies and taken students on a competitive basis instead of insisting on all or nothing. Of course, the correct solution, which would have pleased both Mr. Escalante and the union, would have been for the administration to give him the support he needed by hiring more teachers, but that was unacceptable to the administration, probably for lack of funds.

Having made this point, however, I think the author has scored enormously important points in this article. I have no doubt that the grumbling reported on by some of Mr. Escalante's colleagues is justified. People who create programs like this tend to be bullheaded, since otherwise they will accomplish nothing: overcoming bureaucratic inertia is the hardest job there is in any field. The shame of it is that there is something about our public schools that makes the kind of effort Jaime Escalante put into this unsustainable over the long haul. The article should become required reading at all teachers colleges, and administrators should be made to memorize it.

The article appeared in Reasononline, July 2002.
Link: http://reason.com/0207/fe.jj.stand.shtml