

VIEWPOINTS: Students owe debt to Jaime Escalante for AP challenge

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By MARY BOEHM

There are 5,700 Alabama teenagers who owe a debt of gratitude to Jaime Escalante, the charismatic California math teacher who was the subject of the 1988 movie "Stand and Deliver."

Escalante, best known for teaching college-level Advanced Placement calculus to students in one of East Los Angeles' rough neighborhoods, died last month just as Alabama students, parents and guidance counselors were making important decisions about who will take which courses next year.

Though Escalante never taught here, his spirit of high expectations for all students already pervades A+ College Ready's 23 program high schools scattered across the state. And the impact will grow as the initiative spreads to 20 additional schools for the upcoming year, from Huntsville to Dothan and from McCalla to Cleburne County. We fully expect another 6,400 students to sign up for these AP classes in 2010-11.

A+ College Ready, a division of the A+ Education Partnership, is a statewide initiative to dramatically increase success on AP math, science and English exams. This is in pursuit of two larger goals -- eliminating in-

equities in AP access and fostering the next generation of scientists and engineers.

You may ask why this is needed. The data show there are many more students who are capable of doing AP work than have been taking these courses. Minorities or students from low-income families are particularly likely to be left out.

Thankfully, there are data to help us find these diamonds in the rough, and, in just two years, thousands of them have stepped up to the challenge of AP. These college-level courses -- offered in high school -- conclude with a comprehensive, college-level exam, and a passing score on that exam will earn them credit hours at most colleges and universities around the country.

In just the first year, participating schools saw an 83 percent increase in passing scores on AP exams. Minority students from those schools earned 68 percent more passing scores than the year before. Two Jefferson County high schools -- Gardendale and Hueytown -- went from having very few qualifying scores to nearly reaching the national average of passing scores compared to enrollment.

How are those dramatic gains possible? It happened for three key reasons: Schools agreed to offer more AP courses; teachers stepped up to get the training and support they needed to teach at the rigor and pace of a



Jaime Escalante

college-level course, and students enrolled in far greater numbers than previous years.

The students and teachers do the hard work that makes these results happen, but the success would not be possible without significant support from the donors. A gift from the National Math and Science Initiative and ExxonMobil created the initiative. Alabama businesses -- led by Alabama Power Co., Regions and Boeing -- have provided essential matching dollars.

The process starts with all 10th- graders taking the PSAT, a version of the college entrance exam that can be used to predict potential AP success. These scores break down any preconceived notions that might exist about which students should take AP classes. Faced with long lists of students generated from the data, schools realize they can offer many new AP courses because the courses will be full.

Schools have worked hard to make this possible. In one example, a school has 22 students with the potential to earn a passing score on the AP calculus exam, but they haven't had all the prerequisites. Summer school is usually only for remediation or make up, not for advancement. But this summer, we will use grant funds to offer precalculus so students can make the most of this opportunity.

As exciting as these numbers are, they are just the beginning. Half of our high schools still don't offer Advanced Placement, though ACCESS distance learning is changing that. Alabama still has a long way to go, when only 7.5 percent of last year's Alabama seniors made at least one passing AP score. The national average for the class of 2009 was 16 percent.

So thank you, Jaime Escalante. Rest in peace. And thank you to the students, teachers, school leaders and donors in Alabama who are keeping his ideals alive.

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