



Eduardo Padrón

# UPFRONT

TODAY'S YOUTH  
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WHAT COULD MATH  
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MOST OF US ARE FAMILIAR WITH JAIME ESCALANTE, the wonderful math teacher who soared to prominence via the 1988 film, *Stand and Deliver*. One of the more telling exchanges occurred early in the film when Lou Diamond Phillips' character advised his teacher that he'd need two books.

"One for here and one for home. I can't be seen walking around with that book."

"Of course," replied Edward James Olmos' Escalante. "Wouldn't want anyone thinking you're intelligent, would you?"

So, there you have it. In one sentence, we have our challenge writ large. Long before derivatives and integrals, we are confronted by a booming street ethos, one with its own understanding of "smart."

This is a hot, brassy world that few of us north of our teens understand. That kids' pants don't fit and too much shows—well, we shouldn't be alarmed. Our predecessors didn't get Bob Dylan or James Brown or The Beatles and they will all be Kennedy Center honorees before it's over. A little perspective won't hurt us.

What should interest us is that Mr. Escalante convinced a classroom of barrio toughs, with not a little charm and guile, that learning advanced calculus was worth their time. He challenged them: "Tough guys don't do math," he told them. "Tough guys fry chicken for a living." He poked at their limits: "If the only thing you know how to do is add and subtract, you will only be prepared to do one thing: Pump gas."

This is just the screenwriter talking, you say. Get real, it's just a movie. Or you might think the kids in our high schools are much too hard-edged to be taken in by such taunts. Well, you could be right, but that won't make the challenge disappear. The world at their doorstep is dangerous and unreasonable. They're growing up amidst a torrent of synthetic and virtual quick fixes. What could math possibly do for them?

For openers, it can earn them as much as \$900,000. That's the most recent Census Bureau calculation of the difference in lifetime earnings between high school graduates and those who attain associate's and bachelor's degrees. Yet not nearly enough students are bound to collect the prize. Fewer than 70 percent now graduate from high schools across the country, with the Hispanic graduation rate failing to surpass the national average in a single state. Only 57.8 percent graduate according to Editorial Projects in Education's recent report, *Diplomas Count: Ready for What?*

This is the challenge of our time. On one battlefield in East L.A., a unique field general told his charges, "You're going to work harder here than you've ever worked anywhere else. And the only thing I ask from you is *ganas*, desire. If you don't have *ganas*, I will give it to you—because I'm an expert."

We need an army of Jaime Escalantes, teachers who penetrate the world of our children and make a case for intellect and engagement.

Did you know that IT companies are begging Congress to expand the number of visas for engineers, scientists and—you guessed it—mathematicians? I'm not taking sides in the immigration argument, but I will tell you this: The long-term solution is not in foreign workers; the solution is waiting, searching for *ganas*, in the barrios of this country. **H**

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