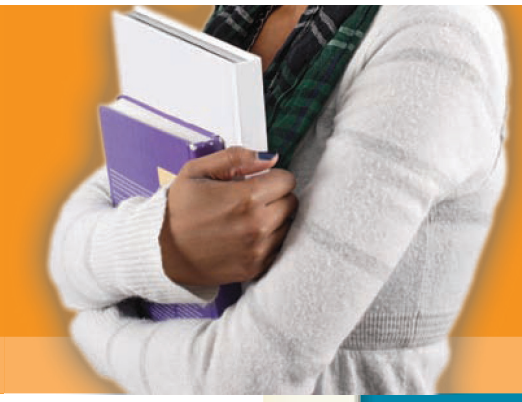
Background *"Kewauna's Ambition" is an excerpt from* **Paul Tough's** *book* How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character. *In his research for this book, Tough met Kewauna Lerma, a 17-year-old student in a program called OneGoal, which works with high schools in Chicago to help at-risk students by teaching them noncognitive skills such as grit and self-control. Kewauna had a chaotic childhood, and she was homeless for a while. When she was 15, she was arrested for punching a police officer. But after a family intervention, Kewauna started working harder at school. With the help of OneGoal teacher Michele Stefl, Kewauna graduated high school and enrolled in college.*

Kewauna's Ambition

***FROM* HOW CHILDREN SUCCEED**



Nonfiction by Paul Tough

CLOSE READ Notes

1. **READ** As you read lines 1–30, begin to collect and cite text evidence.

- Underline Kewauna's challenges.
- Circle key elements of Kewauna's strategy for success.
- In the margin, use your own words to describe each part of her strategy.

Her first fall at Western Illinois, Kewauna took introductory courses—English 100, Math 100, Sociology 100. None of them was easy for her, but the course she found most challenging was Biology 170, Introduction to Health Careers. The professor was a popular lecturer, so the class was pretty full, and most of the students were upperclassmen. On the first day of class, Kewauna did what Michele Stefl had recommended: she politely introduced herself to the professor before class, and then she sat in the front row, which until Kewauna sat down was occupied entirely by white girls. The other African American students all tended to sit at the back, which disappointed Kewauna. ("That's what they *expect* you to do," she said when we talked by phone that fall. "Back in the civil rights movement, if they told you you had to sit in the back, you wouldn't do it.")

Her biology professor used a lot of scientific terms in his lectures that Kewauna wasn't familiar with. So she came up with a strategy: every time he used a word she didn't understand, she wrote it down and put a red star next to it. At the end of the class, she waited until all the other students who wanted to talk to the professor had taken their turns, and then she went through each red-starred word with him, one by one, asking him to explain them.

CLOSE READ Notes

Kewauna spent a lot of time interacting with all her professors, in fact. She was a regular at office hours, and she e-mailed them whenever she wasn't clear on assignments. She also tried to make one or two acquaintances among the students in each of her classes, so that if she needed help with homework and couldn't reach the professor, she'd have someone to ask. Through her freshman-support program, she found a writing tutor—she had always had "grammar issues," she told me, as well as trouble with spelling and punctuation—and she made a practice of going over with her tutor every paper she wrote before handing it in. Finally, in December, she felt she had internalized enough about comma splices and dependent clauses, and she handed in her final English paper without going over it with the writing tutor. She got an A.

Still, it was a difficult semester for Kewauna. She was always short of money and had to economize everywhere she could. At one point, she ran out of money on her meal card and just didn't eat for two days. She was studying all the time, it felt like. Every paper was a challenge, and at the end of the semester, she stayed up practically all night, three nights in a row, studying for finals. But her hard work was reflected in her final grades that semester: two B pluses, one A, and, in biology, an A plus. When I spoke to her a few days before Christmas, she sounded a bit depleted, but proud too. "No matter how overwhelming it is, no matter how exhausting it is, I'm not going to give up," she said. "I'm never the type to give up. Even when I played hide-and-go-seek when I was little, I would be outside till eight o'clock, until I found everyone. I don't give up on nothing, no matter how hard."

2. REREAD Reread lines 5–12. Why do you think Kewauna is disappointed that the other African American girls sat in the back? Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

3. READ Read lines 31–50. Circle what the author says most impressed him about Kewauna. In the margin explain why, in your own words.

4. REREAD AND DISCUSS Reread lines 31–50. With a small group, discuss why Kewauna was successful. What central idea does Tough make about Kewauna's success in these lines?

CLOSE READ Notes

There were still seven semesters to go, lots of time for things to go wrong, for setbacks and mistakes and crises. But Kewauna seemed certain of where she was heading and why—almost unnervingly so. What was most remarkable to me about Kewauna was that she was able to marshal her **prodigious** noncognitive capacity—call it grit, conscientiousness, resilience, or the ability to delay gratification—all for a distant prize that was, for her, almost entirely theoretical. She didn't actually *know* any business ladies with briefcases downtown; she didn't even know any college graduates except her teachers.

prodigious :

Not all of Kewauna's fellow OneGoal students are going to take to the deal with the same **conviction**. And it won't be clear for another couple of years whether the leadership skills Kewauna and her classmates were taught are powerful enough to get them through four years of college. But so far, OneGoal's overall persistence numbers are quite good. Of the 128 students, including Kewauna, who started OneGoal as juniors at six Chicago high schools in the fall of 2009, ninety-six were enrolled in four-year colleges as of March 2012. Another fourteen were enrolled in two-year colleges, for an overall college-persistence total of 85 percent. Which left only nineteen students who had veered off the track to a college degree: twelve who left OneGoal before the end of high school, two who joined the military after high school, two who graduated from high school but didn't enroll in college, and three who enrolled in college but dropped out in their first six months. The numbers are less stellar but still impressive for the pilot-program cohort,[1] students for whom OneGoal was a weekly afterschool class. Three years out of high school, 66 percent of the students who enrolled in the program as high-school juniors are still enrolled in college. Those numbers grow more significant when you recall that OneGoal teachers are deliberately selecting struggling students who seem especially unlikely to go to college.

conviction:

Jeff Nelson[2] would be the first to admit that what he has created is far from a perfect solution for the widespread dysfunction of the country's human-capital[3] pipeline. Ideally, we should have in place an education and social-

[1] **cohort:** a group of individuals having a statistical factor (as age or class membership) in common in a demographic study.

[2] **Jeff Nelson:** co-founder and CEO of OneGoal.

[3] **human capital:** skills, training, and experience that make an employee valuable in the marketplace.

5. READ As you read lines 51–78, summarize what you learn about OneGoal in the margin.

CLOSE READ Notes

support system that produces teenagers from the South Side who *aren't* regularly two or three or four years behind grade level. For now, though, OneGoal and the theories that underlie it seem like a most valuable intervention, a program that, for about fourteen hundred dollars a year per student, regularly turns underperforming, undermotivated, low-income teenagers into successful college students.

6. REREAD Reread lines 67–78. How does Tough think OneGoal might be improved? Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

SHORT RESPONSE

Cite Text Evidence Identify two of Tough's central ideas, and show how he supports them. Review your reading notes, and be sure to **cite text evidence** from the essay in your response.