The Seven Secrets of Successful Inner-City Students

Frederick M. Hampton

We've all heard of individuals who are born into poverty, attend failing schools, are raised by a single parent, and survive tough city streets. Yet some of those kids then graduate with honors, attend college, and go on to become some of our most admired citizens. Why does one inner-city student succeed in school while another fails? What can the successful students relay from their experiences that may propel similarly disadvantaged students toward higher academic achievement? Answers to these questions are complex and may never be fully understood, but why not ask the successful inner-city students themselves: "How did you do it?"

I investigated that question in Cleveland, Ohio, once labeled the "poorest big city" in America. By some estimates Cleveland schools in 2004–06 represented a microcosm of the country's worst problems in education: overcrowded classrooms, high absenteeism, low pass rates on state achievement tests, and a graduation rate less than 50 percent. To pinpoint common traits among academically successful students—but should not have been statistically and demographically—we extensively interviewed a small group of students at John F. Kennedy High School in Cleveland. We also interviewed students' teachers and their principals for supporting evidence.

The Students

This group of five students overcame spectacularly difficult personal and family circumstances. None of the students had been involved with their fathers, all were on public assistance, one of the students had faced homelessness, and others had been in the care of various extended family members. Some of the students had witnessed the effects of drug use on their mothers, and all lived in neighborhoods with high drug, crime, and gang activity. Yet given those conditions, all five of these students also demonstrated high academic achievement and mapped out promising post-high school careers. The following describes each student at the end of his or her senior year:

- "William" has a 3.6 grade point average (GPA). He will join the U.S. Air Force after graduation, but his career goal is to become an engineer and eventually to work in aircraft design.
- "Kevin" has a 3.9 GPA. Kevin has been accepted at a historically black southern college and awarded a $6,000 academic scholarship. His career goal is to receive a degree in veterinary medicine and to open an animal clinic in the inner city.
- "Evelyn" has a 3.4 GPA. Evelyn has been accepted into an historically black college in Ohio, but plans to enter the U.S. Navy after graduation. Her career goal is to become a social worker.
- "Jocelyn" is ranked in the top 10 of her senior class and has a 4.6 GPA. Jocelyn has been awarded a full academic scholarship to a historically black southern college. Her career goal is to become a psychologist.
- "Anna" has a 3.3 GPA. Anna has been accepted into an historically black college in Ohio. Her career goal is to become a nurse.

The Seven Secrets

Through a comparative analysis of the content of the student and teacher interviews, seven habits emerged that reflected the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that contributed to these students' academic success.

Secret 1: Self-Respect
Although each student tended to exhibit differing strengths among the identified characteristics that lead to academic success, every student emphasized the importance of self-respect. This element was the basis for both their short- and long-term aspirations. The students set high personal standards and took pride in themselves, which appeared to greatly influence their decision-making processes. One by one, students communicated their belief that those who maintain high levels of self-respect tend to steer away from detrimental or embarrassing situations. Moreover, the students stated that they simply did not want to repeat the mistakes of their parents.

Secret 2: Command of Standard English

The most striking characteristic exhibited by students was their strong command of Standard English. When asked why they were so well-spoken, students described the importance of being able to effectively communicate in a variety of environments. These students believed people would make judgments of them and their intelligence based on their speaking abilities.

Students possessed what they referred to as a “professional” language and a “street” language. They used their professional language during teacher interactions, when they were in the presence of respected adults, or anytime they were in settings where Standard English was appropriate. For example, one student from one of the toughest neighborhoods used a different register when he worked part-time as a host in an upscale restaurant that served clientele from the opposite end of the socioeconomic scale.

Street language was used mostly when relaxing with friends. The use of street language also served as a mechanism to ensure their continued acceptance in their neighborhoods. Each student had acquired the ability to toggle comfortably between two ways of speaking.

Secret 3: Goal-Setting Ability

One of the most evenly distributed group characteristics was the ability to picture and plan life beyond the present day. These students believed there was much more to life than what could be seen in their neighborhoods and in the financial conditions of most people they encountered.

The students were asked where they saw themselves in five years and how they planned to get there. Their responses highlighted a clear belief in the connection between planning, effort, and outcome. These students were willing to work hard and had a desire to succeed in life. The students viewed their goals as challenges to be mastered, rather than problems to be avoided.

Secret 4: Self-Motivation

Each student has goals in life, but each student also grew up lacking advantages that would aid in goal attainment. High-levels of self-motivation and desire appear to be the impetus that drive the students to pursue their goals. For these students, negative images of inner-city life seemed to provide the fuel for a lifelong determination to escape those conditions. They were all aware of poverty and the consequences for those who became involved with street gangs, drugs, and criminal activity—all of which served as backdrops for their neighborhoods. Having dreams of a better life gave the students hope—and having hope gave them the motivation to work.

Secret 5: Time Management Skills

For these students, spending time wisely and efficiently was essential. In their world, where resources are few, the use of time became the one factor that they could control. When grades are taken seriously, when up to 20 hours per week may be consumed by part-time employment, and when there are after school activities, athletics, and socialization—time is short for these students.

Typically, students were responsible for getting themselves up and to school on time, earning spending money for clothes, cell phones, movies, and other leisure activities and for finding their own transportation. For each student, finding time to study to maintain a high GPA was critical, but so was having money for personal (and in some cases—household) needs.

Students went with little sleep, dashed from school to work, and multitasked homework with bus rides or caring for younger siblings. But there was at least a broad map of how best to spend their time. Occasionally, tasks they wanted to accomplish on a daily basis went undone. However, having a plan for use of time and some determination to stick to a schedule meant more would be accomplished than not having a plan. Vision and foresight for accomplishing daily tasks helped the students develop skills, attitudes, and behaviors that contributed to the long-term attainment of goals.

Secret 6: Consequence Awareness
Much of these students' lives seemed to be based on the knowledge that there would be either positive or negative consequences associated with all their decisions. Whether their decisions and actions were small or large, there would usually be corresponding outcomes.

All of the students were typical teenagers who made teenaged mistakes. They were not "super teens." However, these students did display advanced levels of maturity and responsibility that allowed them to quickly learn from their mistakes and to make more "right" decisions than "wrong." Most importantly, when wrong decisions were made, they tended to be the types of decisions that could be corrected or recovered from over time—as opposed to the types of wrong decisions that become life altering in a negative manner. All of these students had avoided the consequences of becoming dropouts, criminals, drug abusers, alcoholics, or teen parents.

**Secret 7: Respect for Others**

Perhaps the most important characteristic shared by these students was their sense of respect for others. Having respect for others in any realm of society is important, but having respect for others in an inner-city community or school provides distinct advantages.

For these five students, respect for others, in its fullest sense, implied a solid understanding of the importance of common courtesy and good manners. Students who displayed courtesy and good manners tended to put others at ease, gained cooperation easily, and were more readily accepted by their peers. While common courtesy may not overcome all obstacles faced by these students, those assets are valuable tools, especially when having a slight personality advantage becomes the difference between success and failure in various situations.

**Conclusions**

Most inner-city school districts remain under state and national pressure to have students demonstrate improvement on standardized tests. Much of the teachers' and administrators' time is consumed by preparing students to become improved test takers, as opposed to improved learners. For many inner-city students, an absence of long-standing personal skills, attitudes, and behaviors make standardized tests an exercise in futility. Developing inner-city students with the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that will help them want to become academically successful does not necessarily come with a high price tag. We may only need to help students learn these seven secrets.

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*Frederick M. Hampton* is an associate professor of education at Cleveland State University in Cleveland, Ohio.