

High school students tend to grow more motivated over time

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High school students are more motivated in the classroom when they feel they belong at their school. Credit: The Ohio State University

Parents may fear that if their high school student isn't motivated to do well in classes, there's nothing that will change that.

But a new study that followed more than 1,600 students over two years found that students' [academic motivation](#) often did change—and usually for the better.

Results showed that increasing students' sense of "belongingness" in [school](#) was one key way of increasing academic [motivation](#).

"Our results point to a more hopeful picture for students who start out with lower levels of motivation—they tend to shift toward more adaptive profiles with better motivational characteristics over time," said Kui Xie, lead author of the study and professor of educational studies at The Ohio State University.

The study found that motivation was more complex than often assumed. Students often hold multiple types of motivation that drive their academic behavior. For example, some students may be motivated to do well in school by both their intrinsic love of learning, but also the desire to get a [good job](#) after graduation.

Results placed students into six different profiles, from worst, which was amotivated—those who were not motivated at all—to best, autonomous motivated, meaning the [student](#) had an inner desire to learn, with no outside influence needed.

The study was published recently in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*.

The study involved 1,670 students at 11 public high schools in central and northeastern Ohio who were in grades 9 to 11 when the study began.

The students completed surveys that assessed their motivation in two consecutive school years.

Motivation was measured by asking students how much statements like these described them: "I go to school because I experience pleasure and satisfaction while learning new things" and "I go to school because I need at least a [high school diploma](#) to find a high-paying job later on."

School belongingness was measured the first year in a survey that asked students how true statements like this were for them: "I feel like a real part of this school."

Of the six motivation profiles, the researchers considered two of them maladaptive, two of them adaptive and two in the middle.

The maladaptive profiles characterized students who had no motivation at all or were only motivated to go to school because they were forced.

"These are the students who are most at risk of dropping out if we can't find better ways to get them excited about school," said Xie, who heads Ohio State's Research Laboratory for Digital Learning.

The two most adaptive profiles included students who were entirely motivated by their love of learning, or who combined love of learning with some external motivations, such as the desire to get into a good college.

Many students did change their profiles between years one and two of the study, Xie said. Depending on which [profile](#) they started in, between 40% and 77% changed.

While students changed across all profiles, most often they switched to one of the adjacent profiles.

There was an overall positive change in students' motivation, results showed. For example, 8% of the students were in the most adaptive

profile—autonomously motivated—in the first year, and that increased to 11.4% in the second year. The least adaptive profile, the amotivated, described 2.8% of the students in the first year, dropping to 2.1% in the second year.

The other good news in the study was that the most adaptive motivational profiles tended to be the most stable as far as membership between years one and two, according to Xie.

"That means that if we can find better ways to motivate students, if we can get them in a better profile, they tend to stay there," he said.

Why did students tend to move in a positive direction in terms of motivation?

"One reason may be simply because they're a year older and more developmentally mature," he said.

But the study did find two other factors that impacted how likely they were to become more motivated. One, not surprisingly, was prior achievement. Students who had higher grade point averages the first year were more likely to shift to or remain in profiles characterized by higher levels of academic motivation in year two of the study.

The other factor was school belongingness, with students who felt they were more a part of their school in the first year being more likely to move to or stay in a more adaptive profile in the second year.

"This may be one area where we can help students become more motivated," Xie said. "Belongingness is something schools can change. They can find ways to help students feel like they are part of the school community."

These results confirm those of a similar study by Xie and colleagues, published last year in the journal *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, that found the same six motivational profiles, plus one other, in a different, much larger sample of students.

Because the previous study involved 10,527 students, it could identify a rarer profile that wasn't seen in this smaller sample size, he said.

Overall, both studies suggest that schools should routinely assess students' motivation in order to identify students who are most at risk for dropping out or underperforming. Then, schools can create personalized intervention programs that target students based on their motivational profile, he said.

Most importantly, with a routine assessment plan on students' motivation, schools can implement interventions before students disengage or drop out from academic activities.

"When we design interventions, we should think about gradually shifting students to more adaptive profiles," Xie said.

"We need to tailor the motivation strategies to specific profiles. There is no one universal strategy that will work for all groups."

More information: Kui Xie et al. Examining high-school students' motivation change through a person-centered approach., *Journal of Educational Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/edu0000507](https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000507)

Kui Xie et al. A person-centered approach to examining high-school students' motivation, engagement and academic performance, *Contemporary Educational Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101877](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101877)

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