

Teenagers' motivation dips in high school—research shows supportive teachers can really help

August 18 2024, by Andrew J. Martin and Rebecca J. Collie



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Adolescence is often characterized as a time of "[storm and stress](#)".

Young people are dealing with [physical and cognitive changes](#) and, as they move from childhood, can become [increasingly distant from the adults](#) in their lives.

In academic terms, this time of [major hormonal change is also accompanied](#) by a [well-known dip](#) in [students'](#) motivation and [engagement](#) at school. This often coincides with students' going to [high school](#).

How can schools better help [young people](#) at this time? In a [new four-year study](#) we looked at the role of teaching support. We were especially interested to know if teachers' influence on students' motivation and engagement grows or fades across the adolescent years.

Our study

Our study involved 7,769 Year 6 New South Wales government school students who were tracked annually into Year 9. The students were part of the NSW Department of Education's annual ["Tell Them From Me" student survey](#).

Students were asked questions about the teaching support they received, as well as questions about their motivation and engagement. They were given a 0–4 point rating scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

There were three categories of teaching support:

1. **emotional support:** did teachers support and care for students?
2. **instrumental support:** did teachers have clear expectations for students and did they make learning content seem relevant?
3. **management support:** were there clear rules and routines for the class?

Motivation was measured through students' academic aspirations about

the future and how much they valued school (or saw it as important). Engagement was assessed via students' perseverance, efforts with homework, making school friends and whether they had any behavior issues.

In our analysis we also accounted for students' backgrounds, such as gender, [socioeconomic status](#) and prior academic achievement.

Our findings

Our findings confirm there is a decline in students' motivation and engagement from Year 6 to Year 9 (around 18% in total). This is consistent with the known dip in early- to mid-adolescence.

But we also found in each of these four years, teaching support overall (and each of the three teaching support categories) was significantly associated with students' motivation and engagement.

That is, more teaching support was linked to greater student aspirations, valuing school, perseverance, homework effort, connections with school friends and less misconduct at school.

Of particular note, we found the link between teaching support and students' motivation and engagement strengthened each year. For example, teaching support was more strongly linked to students' motivation and engagement in Year 9 than it was in Year 8. Taken together, between Year 6 and Year 9, there was a 40% increase in the role of [teaching](#) support in students' [motivation](#) and engagement.

What this means

This is an empowering finding for teachers because adolescence is

typically seen as a time when the influence of adults declines. Our results show students remain within their teacher's orbit as they move further into adolescence.

What can we do?

Previous research suggests ideas for how teachers can provide [emotional support](#), [instructional support](#), and [management support](#) to students, including:

- spending time getting to know students
- respecting students' individuality
- listening to students' perspectives
- providing emotional encouragement when needed
- ensuring content and tasks are interesting and meaningful to students
- explaining how schoolwork is useful for other schoolwork, or things outside school (for example, world events or paid work)
- having clear, consistent, and logical expectations about classroom behavior
- encouraging student input as classroom rules are developed.

There are also further practical ideas in a NSW Department of Education [guide](#) that accompanies our study.

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