

Let's make the grade

WES HOSKING

A LANDMARK Victorian study is investigating how best to keep students in school amid concern around one-fifth are at risk of leaving early.

The three-year study's initial findings indicate teachers' ability to connect with students is one of the bigger factors in keeping them in school.

Professor Johanna Wyn, leading the study through the University of Melbourne's

Youth Research Centre, said countless programs aimed to keep students in class but there was little information about what made some work.

Researchers are analysing around half a dozen intervention programs involving hundreds of students.

Work on the first phase will be completed this year, but preliminary data show the

quality of students' relationships with teachers, with each other, and how connected they feel to school are most crucial.

Prof Wyn said about 20 per cent of 15 to 19-year-olds nationwide were at risk of leaving school early, putting them at risk of a life of disadvantage.

"If we don't keep these kids connected to school, then they go into a space where they

struggle enormously to get any kind of meaningful work. It is a real path of struggle," she said.

"And once they are out, it's really hard to get back in."

The executive director (operations) of Hands On Learning Australia, Dr Richard O'Donovan, whose charity de-

ploys artisan teachers to work with at-risk students on building projects at 50 secondary

schools, said non-academic pupils were often overlooked.

The research, funded by the Australian Research Council, shows Hands On participants feel twice as included in school as others and feel more useful, and that their day matters.

"If you have a kid who is depressed and who is completely switched off, they may be turning up to school every day but

Study looks at how to keep students in school

they may be miserable and end up just dropping at out at year 10," Dr O'Donovan said.

"It looks as if they have been attending, it looks as if retention is good, but the reality is that under the surface, beneath those very narrow measures, those kids are really suffering."

Almost 84 per cent of Victorian year 7 students go on to finish year 12 — above the national average.

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