



STRATEGIC **DATA** PROJECT

## SDP FELLOWSHIP CAPSTONE REPORT

# 2013 Attendance Intervention in Springfield Public Schools

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**SDP Fellowship Capstone Reports**

SDP Fellows compose capstone reports to reflect the work that they led in their education agencies during the two-year program. The reports demonstrate both the impact fellows make and the role of SDP in supporting their growth as data strategists. Additionally, they provide recommendations to their host agency and will serve as guides to other agencies, future fellows, and researchers seeking to do similar work. *The views or opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or position of SDP or the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University.*

### **Abstract**

Student attendance in high school, particularly 9<sup>th</sup> grade attendance, is a problem in many districts. It is certainly an issue in the Springfield (MA) public schools. One potential method for increasing attendance rates is by taking advantage of the “saying is believing” effect that has been documented in the psychology literature. According to this theory people who say publicly they behave a certain way (i.e., “I attend school regularly” or “I exercise regularly”) or that it is important to behave a certain way start exhibiting that behavior more often. To test the impact of this principal on student attendance the Springfield Public Schools implemented a randomized control study. The intervention consisted of having randomly selected ninth grade students write a letter to sixth grade students about why attending school regularly is important, while the control group wrote about the importance of exercise.

### **Introduction**

The Springfield Public Schools (SPS) serve over 25,000 students. Almost 88% of these students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, 17% receive ELL services and 19% receive special education services. The district is 61% Hispanic and 20% African-American. Caucasian students are the third largest racial group at close to 14%. Springfield has struggled with issues facing many urban school districts including high rates of retention and dropouts, a large number of disciplinary infractions and low academic achievement. The graduation rate in the 2011-2012 school year was 56%. In that same school year 41% of students in tested grades were proficient in English, 28% were in math, and 21% in science and technology/engineering (refer to Appendix A for a table summarizing district level data).

Attendance is another area where SPS is trying to improve. In the 2012 school year the district’s attendance rate was a little less than 92%, about 3 percentage points lower than the state average. The ninth grade attendance rate of 86% was the lowest of any grade level in Springfield, as it generally is. In order to address this issue a randomized control study using the “saying is believing” effect was implemented at a high school with one of the lowest attendance rates in the Springfield school district.

### **Background Research**

There have been several studies in recent years demonstrating that when people say they exhibit a certain behavior or that behaving in a certain way is important, they actually start behaving in a

different way (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003). This phenomenon is known as “saying is believing”.

### **Study Design in SPS**

In the study conducted in SPS, 242 students were divided randomly into one of three groups. There were two intervention groups and one control group. One intervention group wrote a letter to sixth graders about why attending school regularly is important, the second intervention group wrote about the importance of attendance but also included why regular attendance is important to their teachers and how attendance can impact teacher’s perceptions of a student. There was also a randomly selected control group that wrote about why exercise is important. The idea behind the study was that the students that wrote about attendance would have higher attendance after writing the letters than the students in the control group. The group of students that wrote about the impact of regular attendance on teachers’ perceptions of students was included in case teacher perception had an additional impact on student attendance. Of the 242 students initially included in the sample 108 actually wrote letters.

This project had several goals:

1. Test a method of improving student attendance and contribute to the current body of research
2. Demonstrate to school and district personnel that implementing a randomized control study in a school setting was possible
3. Encourage administrators and other school leaders to consider how the impact of new interventions will be measured from the beginning, and to help convince them that a randomized control study is the best method of doing this

### **Role of the Data Strategist**

The Strategic Data Fellow played a crucial role in getting this study implemented. The first step was identifying the need. Concerns about ninth grade students attendance was front and center in terms of district and school level concerns. The fellow then worked with his faculty advisor to think about how they might have an impact on this issue. The advisor suggested the intervention and they worked together to create a proposal. The fellow was responsible for logistics and the analysis of results. Logistical issues included getting the district and school to agree to participate, recruiting teachers, scheduling the letter writing, and delivering the letters to sixth graders in the district.

### **Challenges Faced**

One of the biggest challenges of the project was recruiting teachers and then working with them to get the letter writing session scheduled. Initially, the fellow tried to work through the principal and had very little success. Once the fellow started working with Instructional Leadership Specialists (ILS) in the school he had a lot more success. The ILS's role is to work one-on-one with teachers to improve instruction. Principals were too busy to engage directly in the study; however the ILS had more time and had a closer relationship with teachers. This relationship made it much easier to recruit. The ILS could also act as a go between for the fellow. When some of the teachers who had agreed to participate were unresponsive to the fellow's emails or phone calls, the ILS could step in and remind them to do so. In the end four teachers were recruited to participate.

Another challenge was getting the project approved by district and school leadership, but the challenge wasn't because people resisted the idea of the intervention. Instead, the biggest challenge in getting this study approved was finding time to meet with district and school leaders so they could sign off on the proposal. In Springfield the district is small enough that the fellow had a relationship with several of the decision makers, but he also used his supervisor both to get on the calendar of people he needed to meet with and to voice support for the idea of the project. In larger districts it might be more challenging to get this approved as there is likely a more formal decision making process and the fellow might not have a personal relationship with as many people in decision making roles.

### **Study Outcomes**

The outcomes of the study have overall been mixed. The attendance rates for students in the control and intervention groups were not different after implementing the intervention; however both groups had higher attendance rates than other ninth graders at the same school even after controlling for prior attendance. Below is a table summarizing attendance for students in the control and intervention groups as well as for 9<sup>th</sup> graders who did not participate in the study. Differences between the control and intervention groups were not significant at the .05 level.

<b>Attendance Before and After Writing Letters to Sixth Graders</b>		
<b>Group</b>	<b>Attendance Rate Before Study</b>	<b>Attendance Rate After Study</b>
Control	88.6%	88.4%
Interv No Teach	89.4%	89.0%
Interv Teach	89.6%	89.5%
Not in Study	87.5%	84.1%

While attendance after participating in the study was not higher for students in the intervention group compared to the control group, all students who participated in the study had higher attendance than those that did not and the gap between study participants and non-participants was wider post study than pre-study.

There are several theories why this might be. First, the letter writing was conducted during class and led to a great deal of discussion about attendance. There was more discussion of attendance than the importance of exercise.

Second, in some classes teachers told their students that the purpose of the letter writing was to increase sixth grade attendance even though the instructions were to describe this as an attempt to help sixth graders with a “variety of issues” they were having. Finally, it is possible simply the act of asking students to write the letters empowered and engaged students in a way that does not happen often in Springfield. Or Perhaps being told that they could be an example to other, younger, students and that their opinions mattered led to higher student attendance.

Other positive impacts of the study include supporting a district ELA goal of increasing the amount students write and the implementation of other randomized control studies in the district. There are three studies either in the planning stage or actually being conducted currently in Springfield. One of these is focused on teacher/student relationships, another is focused on increasing students’ use of their own data and on goal setting and the third is a revamped version of this letter writing initiative.

**Appendix A**

<b>Springfield Public Schools Data Overview</b>		
<b>Category</b>	<b>Springfield</b>	<b>State</b>
Enrollment	25,185	953,369
Percent Hispanic	59.8%	16.7%
Percent African-American	20.7%	8.3%
Percent White	13.7%	67.0%
Percent Low Income	85.6%	35.2%
Percent ELL	15.7%	7.3%
Percent SPED	20.7%	17.0%
Attendance Rate	91.8%	94.9%
In School Suspension Rate	11.3%	3.4%
Out of School Suspension Rate	15.4%	5.4%
Retention Rate	7.4%	1.9%
Truancy Rate	22.5%	5.0%
Graduation Rate	52.1%	83.4%
Dropout Rate	11.7%	7.2%
ELA Proficient or Higher	41.0%	69.0%
Math Proficient or Higher	28.0%	59.0%
Science Proficient or Higher	21.0%	54.0%
ELA Student Growth Percentile	39.0%	50.0%
Math Student Growth Percentile	36.0%	50.0%