

Can letters encourage families to get support to avoid truancy?

Partner(s): [Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants](#)

Timeline: 2018 - Present

Status: Analysis

Method: [Randomized Evaluation](#)

Links: [Open Science Framework](#)

Students can face many barriers getting to school, such as lack of affordable transportation and childcare for siblings, that can lead to a student being considered truant. The [Show Up, Stand Out \(SUSO\) program](#) is designed to help students and families overcome those barriers, but many families who are referred to SUSO do not accept voluntary support services. We tested whether a timely letter informing families about SUSO's services would help encourage more families to get support. We found that the letter did not increase engagement and may have even reduced the number of families accepting support services.

Why is this issue important in DC?

More than 1 in 4 students are truant in DC schools.¹ The Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) runs SUSO to connect families of students who have 5-9 unexcused absences with resources to find stable housing, clothing, health, and scheduling support. Families are unfamiliar with the Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) who provide the services and many mistakenly believe that the services are connected to child protective services, so a large proportion of eligible families don't participate.

What did we do?

We designed a letter to be sent from a student's school to their family introducing them and telling them that they would hear from the CBO. The letter emphasized SUSO's partnership with schools to counter families' lack of familiarity with the CBOs and build trust.

The Lab set up an automated system to send a letter to 649 randomly chosen families whenever a student was referred to SUSO by their school. To assess the letter's impact, we then collected data on two key outcomes: whether families participated in SUSO and students' attendance rates.

What have we learned?

We found that the letter did not increase families' participation in SUSO and may have even reduced participation. We are currently analyzing data to see if the letters had an effect on school attendance.

What comes next?

We have temporarily stopped sending letters to families, because our initial results suggest that they do not encourage families to participate in SUSO. In light of these results, OVSJG is investing in additional technical assistance and training for CBOs to increase the number of families accepting support services.

What happened behind the scenes?

CBOs only have a two-week window in which to engage families after referral, so we needed to develop an automated way to send the letters within one day of referral. We thought this would be relatively easy for nerds like us, but it wound up taking weeks of coding to link SUSO's database to an online mail vendor. It was a lot of work for a letter that might have actually had a negative effect, but the plus side is that we have a system for similar future projects!

¹ [DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education \(2018\).](#)