

Compton Unified School District's Attendance Journey

At Compton Unified School District, attendance improvement did not come from a single tactic or short-term initiative. District leaders describe it as the result of steady, intentional system building anchored in a shared belief that showing up to school is closely tied to student well-being, family trust, and student sense of belonging.

Serving students across elementary, middle, and high schools, Compton Unified operates in a community shaped by long-standing structural challenges and deep strengths. District leaders emphasized that their attendance work needed to reflect both. Rather than isolating attendance as a compliance issue, they framed it as an indicator of how well systems were supporting students and families.

From the superintendent's office to school front desks, the message has been consistent: Attendance is everyone's responsibility, and improvement requires coordination across roles, clear expectations, and follow-through over time.

In 2022, 29% of Compton Unified students were chronically absent (missing at least 10% of school days). By 2025, that number had dropped to 5%, representing a major improvement in overall attendance in the district.

Starting Point: Attendance Challenges and Conditions

Attendance had been a persistent concern in the district for years. Leaders pointed to multiple contributing factors, including post-pandemic disruption, student mobility, transportation challenges, and family stress related to health, housing, and safety. Patterns varied across schools and grade levels, but chronic absence remained a common concern, particularly for students hovering just above or below the threshold.

The turning point came when district leaders began reviewing attendance data more systematically and comparing their trends with those of neighboring districts. What they saw confirmed staff concerns and prompted deeper reflection. Some improvements were visible, but progress was uneven and fragile.

Importantly, leaders did not frame these challenges simply as individual student or family issues. They talked openly about trust, connection, and how school experiences either supported or discouraged attendance. That framing shaped the strategies that followed.

Shifts in Thinking and Strategy

A key shift in Compton Unified's approach was treating attendance as a districtwide systems issue rather than the responsibility of individual schools or staff members. Leaders rejected the idea that a single program could produce lasting results. Instead, they focused on aligning leadership expectations, data routines, family outreach, and student supports into one coherent strategy.

Data played a central role but not as a tool for punishment. The district invested in common attendance reports used consistently across schools. These reports allowed leaders to see attendance patterns starting on the first day of school and to identify students who were already at risk.

This shift also required patience. District leaders noted that many of the systems now credited with improvement had been put in place years earlier. Real change followed sustained attention, not quick wins.

Core Practices and Policies in Action

Across the district, a set of shared practices now guides how schools prevent and respond to attendance concerns.

Clear Data Routines and Shared Accountability

Attendance data are updated daily and reviewed regularly at both the school and district levels. Principals participate in monthly data conversations with the superintendent, during which they discuss trends, identify students in need of support, and flag barriers that require district-level action. This visibility reinforces attendance as a standing priority rather than a seasonal concern.

Early Outreach and Family Partnership

When students begin missing school, outreach happens quickly. Community relations specialists and school staff connect with families through phone calls and home visits that emphasize partnership and problem solving. Leaders described these visits as relationship-building efforts, not enforcement. Over time, this approach has helped improve attendance outcomes for several student groups by addressing barriers early and maintaining trust.

School-Level Examples

At Dominguez High School, staff focus closely on students who are chronically absent or near the threshold. Attendance teams coordinate independent study options, teacher confirmation of assignments, and rapid family notification, often within hours of the school day starting. Teachers initially expressed hesitation about additional procedures, but consistent routines and clear communication helped build buy-in.

Whaley Middle School offers another perspective. The principal there emphasized relationships as the foundation for attendance improvement. Early in his tenure, he built partnerships with local businesses and framed attendance as essential to student safety and community well-being. Daily attendance calls, home visits when needed, and visible incentives reinforced shared expectations.

At Laurel K–8, attendance supports begin on the first day of school. Students with prior attendance challenges are identified immediately, and supports such as daily family communication, check-in and check-out routines, incentives, and principal home visits are activated early. Attendance is reinforced through social-emotional learning, extracurricular opportunities, and close coordination among office staff, teachers, and the school social worker.

Implementation Realities and Adaptation

District and school leaders consistently described visibility and persistence as essential to making these practices work. Leaders made attendance a visible priority by being present on campuses, participating in walkthroughs, and maintaining predictable data and communication routines.

Not every strategy worked as planned. Leaders recalled adjusting messaging when early efforts met resistance or fatigue. They also described adapting outreach in response to changing community conditions, including heightened safety concerns related to immigration enforcement. In those moments, the district took a quieter approach focused on sharing accurate information and reinforcing trust.

Flexibility, leaders noted, was not a departure from consistency. It was part of sustaining it.

Reflections and Advice for Others

Looking back, Compton Unified leaders emphasized that progress came from will, clarity, and consistency rather than from any single program. Attendance improved when leaders treated it as a nonnegotiable priority and invested in systems that made expectations clear and support visible.

Their advice to other districts was practical and direct: Be present in schools. Create systems for every step of the work. Treat attendance as shared work across roles. Stay focused on students, even when challenges and external pressure arise.

As one district leader summarized, “Attendance improvement does not scale without the will to lead and without keeping students at the center of every decision.”