

# Calipatria Unified School District

## A Home-Grown Approach to Attendance Improvement

Calipatria Unified School District is a small, tight-knit, rural school district in southern California, near the border with Mexicali, Mexico. The district includes four schools (two elementary, one middle, and one high school) serving close to a thousand students, many of whom face economic hardship and language barriers.

In recent years, Calipatria Unified has experienced shifts in both school and community conditions, including significant staff turnover at the middle school and declining enrollment. Families expressed heightened concerns about safety and trust in schools as well as misunderstanding about illness protocols following COVID-19, which district leaders believe contributed to widespread disengagement and lower attendance across the district.

These changes required new approaches and foundational staff training in attendance policies and student engagement strategies. Rather than relying on compliance-based approaches, Calipatria Unified is shifting toward a collaborative, districtwide strategy that treats attendance as a relationship- and trust-building effort.

In 2022, 43% of Calipatria Unified students were chronically absent (missing at least 10% of school days). By 2025, that number had dropped to 19%, representing a major improvement in overall attendance in the district.

## Building Trust With Families

Calipatria Unified emphasizes positive, proactive communication with families. The district is intentionally shifting from punitive responses to family and student engagement and support. This approach strengthens family partnerships, improves school climate, and supports better attendance over time.

Messaging to families emphasizes the importance of attending school consistently and staying for the full day. Staff build on existing relationships and cultural connections to address attendance barriers through education and dialogue rather than punishment. Counselors play a key role in helping families understand attendance data and their implications for learning. Counselors also discuss common absence issues, such as such as early departures or trips to visit family in Mexico, and work with families and students to reinforce the value of consistent attendance.

## Leadership Rooted in Community

Calipatria Unified takes a “grow your own” approach to leadership and staffing. This is reflected in the superintendent, who attended local schools, left to pursue higher education, and later returned as a school counselor before becoming the district’s lead administrator. Because of the community’s remoteness and location, recruiting and retaining teachers from outside the region can be challenging. In response, the district encourages local residents to become educators and join their schools. Growing leaders from within the community strengthens the school–community ties, improves teacher and student retention, and builds trust with families and students, who know their teachers understand them.

Local teachers understand the context of their communities and, with the right support, are well positioned to address the drivers of absenteeism. Following significant staff turnover, Calipatria Unified increased its focus on training and supporting new “homegrown” educators, particularly regarding attendance strategies and identifying the root causes of absenteeism. Teachers and school leaders are encouraged to take ownership of attendance strategies and tailor them to their students and families. Schools assess local needs and design incentives, messaging, and interventions that reflect their communities.

At Grace Smith Elementary, students selected a clock inspired by *Beauty and the Beast* as the school’s unofficial attendance mascot, a reminder for students and families to “be on time and stay all day.” Fremont Primary honors students with improved attendance with school-wide recognition and opportunities to visit the ‘treasure box’. The school also recognizes parents and families who have supported their student’s improved attendance. These efforts help build strong classroom communities that foster belonging and connection. Teachers also keep students engaged by introducing new and creative incentives to surprise the students each year.

At Bill Young Middle School, attendance strategies reflect the developmental needs of adolescents. The school counselor creates individualized reports that summarize each student’s attendance and academic records. Counselors review the reports with students to highlight the connection between attendance and their broader outcomes. Conversations focus on what students need to feel a sense of belonging and to feel supported at school and are opportunities to answer questions they have about school expectations. This approach helps students better understand their own behaviors while building relationships with trusted adults in the school community.

## Districtwide Initiatives and Alignment

The district leverages after-school and weekend programming to support working families and create safe, engaging environments where students want to be. The Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELOP) includes Saturday school as both an intervention and an engagement strategy. ELOP is available to the two elementary schools and the middle school. Participation is flexible, with some students attending to make up missed time and others joining

voluntarily and even bringing friends. Increased participation in ELOP underscores a key takeaway: **Attendance improves when school is a place where students want to be.**

Calipatria Unified has implemented California's new Attendance Recovery Program into ELOP. Students now have a second chance to learn what they missed when they were absent as well as the opportunity to recover attendance time by participating in Saturday school and after-school programs. ELOP offerings combine academic support with enrichment, creating engaging and welcoming spaces for students. In addition to structured learning, students participate in arts and crafts, play in the school gymnasium, and attend local community events. Some Saturday sessions even include pancake breakfasts cooked on site.

To support alignment, the central office convenes monthly cross-departmental attendance meetings with staff from all school sites, including attendance clerks, counselors, migrant coordinators, family resource center staff, and front office personnel. During these meetings, district staff build shared understanding of attendance concepts and review attendance data to guide interventions. These conversations reinforce that attendance is a community-wide responsibility supported by a coordinated, district effort.

## Final Takeaways

Calipatria Unified shows how a small, rural system can build a comprehensive, home-grown approach to improving attendance that is grounded in relationships, community knowledge, and adaptability. Everyone has a role in improving student attendance. By centering trust and shared responsibility, the district has brought community members, families, students, and educators together around a common goal. This shift from compliance to connection, and from one-size-fits-all approaches to locally driven strategies, is laying the foundation for sustained improvements in attendance and student engagement.

## Lessons Learned

1. *Belonging drives attendance.*  
Creating welcoming, engaging environments through after-school programs, relationships, and community connections encourages students to attend consistently.
2. *Local challenges need local solutions.*  
Schools are more effective when they tailor strategies to their students, families, and community context.
3. *Flexibility builds ownership.*  
Providing staff with data, support, and flexibility in decision-making empowers them to take ownership of their work and drive innovation.
4. *Collaboration strengthens impact.*  
Aligning efforts across roles, departments, and schools helps to keep attendance as a shared priority.