

Empire School District

Attendance Is the Priority

Located in a working-class community in east Modesto, Empire Union School District comprises five elementary schools and one intermediate school. The district serves a diverse student population of approximately 2,800 students, with a high proportion of multilingual learners. In a community where families juggle multiple jobs and responsibilities, clarifying policies about attendance alone would not likely address the root causes of student chronic absenteeism. It would require rebuilding something less visible but more essential: trust, connection, and a sense that school matters. In response, Empire's approach to attendance shifted in fundamental ways: from tracking absences to understanding them, and from enforcing rules to strengthening relationships.

When the current superintendent stepped into his first year as the district leader, the district had the worst attendance data in the county, with 55% of students chronically absent. Significantly improving attendance became his first and highest priority. It also became a unifying goal that all staff could rally around. His story highlights how the district approached attendance not as a compliance issue but as a reflection of student well-being, family engagement, and connection to school.

In 2022, 55% of Empire students were chronically absent (missing at least 10% of school days). By 2025, that number had dropped to 24%, representing a major improvement in overall attendance in the district.

It Starts With Data

Initially, the data were stark: Empire ranked last among neighboring districts. At the same time, the district was still recovering from pandemic disruptions, including leadership turnover and inconsistent use of data across schools. Without a clear picture of why students were missing school, district and school leaders found themselves unable to respond effectively.

They stepped back and widened the lens. They analyzed attendance patterns, invested in a new data system, and began calling families directly to understand what was keeping students home. The superintendent explained, "We needed to better understand the why to then be able to identify some really specific steps we could take." The shift from simply tracking absences to uncovering their root

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causes became a turning point. What district leaders learned would shape the district's strategy for bringing students back to school.

Post-COVID, families continued to follow strict pandemic-era health practices, keeping students home for minor symptoms. Some families kept home older students to care for younger siblings. Students and families reported a lack of connection to school. Comprehensive needs assessments revealed that communication gaps and weak relationships contributed to disengagement.

Connections Over Compliance

From the outset, Empire reframed attendance as a relational and engagement-based issue rather than a compliance problem. Leaders focused on why students were not coming to school and how to strengthen connections. With consistent expectations across the district, schools had flexibility to implement strategies based on their context. The district attendance team agreed that at each school, the classroom teacher would call home when a student had three absences. At six absences, the counselor would call. After nine absences, other staff became involved in family outreach. The conversations are tailored to student and family needs, but the process was consistent across schools.

Family outreach and connection became such an important part of getting kids back to school that the district funded a new Director of Family Engagement position. This person, who was bilingual and had strong relational skills, became key to building bridges and fostering community. "We wanted families to be able to connect with someone who wasn't the principal," a district leader shared. New health guidance, based on conversations with nurses and individual calls home, immediately resulted in more students coming to school. Families no longer kept kids home for minor symptoms. Individual calls to families focused on demonstrating care over compliance, which resulted in strengthening relationships.

School-Community Connections

To further strengthen the school-community connection, the district added a family activity bulletin board to the website, listing local events and resources – including those available through schools. In partnership with community organizations, Empire hosted community-building events for students and families, including after-school open houses with fun activities that showcased recent science and math projects from students. Family members and students joined the event, allowing students to show their families their work, introduce them to their teachers, friends, and other parents and families.

These interactive family nights are intentionally focused on connection. The superintendent said, "If we are going to have families on campus, we wanted to make it more of a social gathering where people could connect with people." The events help families become familiar with the broader school community, establish connections with other families, and build trust with

educators. Investing in shared experiences builds and sustains relationships between educators and families, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for students' learning.

Relevant and Engaging Learning

Schools in Empire leveraged California's Expanded Learning Opportunities Program to provide enrichment for students beyond school hours. District offered after-school and summer programs with field trips, guest speakers, hands-on learning, and real-world learning opportunities. The program grew to serve more than 450 students—47% of the student body. The district credits the popularity of the program to the relevant and meaningful learning opportunities. A district leader said they hope the program and continue and expand as needed, because “when kids are at school, good things happen”.

Celebrate Loudly

Empire balanced consistent expectations with school-site flexibility: Every school recognized students and celebrated successes, but each school tailored their celebrations to fit their students' interests. One middle school recognized students' improved attendance with medals to wear during the school day. At the end of the month, the classroom with the best attendance received the highly coveted 'Greatest Overall Attendance Target', or the GOAT, trophy. At an elementary school, students in classrooms with improved attendance earned pencils and stickers, and the principal shared posts on social media congratulating the class on their achievement, thanking families and students for their efforts to consistently come to school.

The district expanded recognition beyond students. It began regularly celebrating staff members by posting recognitions on the district website, including teacher of the year and winners of an award called Employees Make a Difference. Staff members were featured in monthly “Thriving Together” posts, sharing tips to support families and students at home. District leaders were intentional about celebrating small and big wins, modeling what they expected from staff. Their intentionality not only created a culture of connectedness, it built capacity so that the important work lived beyond any one person and would be sustained over time.

It Takes a Team

“All of my memories are because of teachers,” reflected a district leader. “Sports, friends, teachers—these are the things that get kids to school.” This belief shaped Empire's approach to hiring and retaining staff. Leaders intentionally sought employees who could build strong connections with students and families, crafting interview questions to assess relational skills and, in some cases, observing prospective teachers in classroom settings. By prioritizing these qualities, the district aimed to cultivate a team of educators that believe in the power of relationships and their impact on student engagement and attendance.

Recognizing that attendance challenges often extend beyond the classroom, Empire relied on cross-functional teams to identify student needs and develop coordinated solutions. For example, both teachers and school counselors played a key role in gathering data and designing strategies. Counselors began “minute meetings,” during which they met with every student across the district for one minute to ask targeted questions such as “Do you feel connected to anyone at school?” Not only did counselors learn how kids felt about school, they discovered that kids were nervous about sick parents and grandparents and worried about getting sick themselves. Counselors shared this information with district colleagues, sparking closer collaboration with nurses and a local health center. The district scheduled vaccine clinics at school sites and shared news articles focused on physical wellness and staying healthy on the district website. Together, they increased communication with families by embracing a team approach.

Key Lessons Learned

1. *Solutions come from relationships.* Build strong connections between educators and staff and families, students, and school. When those relationships are in place, solutions are more responsive to community needs and more likely to succeed
2. *Sustainable success comes from shared ownership.* By empowering staff across the district to lead and contribute, schools can sustain the work and adapt as needs change
3. *Complex challenges often have simple solutions.* Rather than overcomplicating efforts, focus on a few high-impact strategies that can be implemented consistently and drive meaningful change

Final Takeaways

Empire Unified demonstrates that making attendance a district-wide priority can result in substantial attendance improvements. District leadership has implemented this approach by centering its attendance work on three core principles: building relationships, celebrating success, and fostering shared ownership. Sustainability and success come from using high-impact strategies to make the most change in a short time. Gaining buy-in through relationships and shared ownership ensures that everyone in a school community contributes student attendance and therefore, student success.