Using Technology to Advance Student Attendance

Ontario-Montclair Unified School District

Ontario-Montclair is a large district in California's Inland Empire, serving approximately 19,000 students across 22 elementary schools and six middle schools. The district student population is predominantly Hispanic, and one in three students are English learners. About 90% of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

Just a few years ago, chronic absenteeism was a persistent challenge for Ontario-Montclair. In the 2022–23 school year, approximately 23% of students were chronically absent. Since then, the district has seen steady and substantial improvement: rates dropped to 10% in 2024–25 and are currently estimated at 7% in 2025–2026. District leaders attribute this progress to system-level shifts that embrace technology to communicate with families, assess student needs, and effectively track interventions.

Over time, the district has refined its operating model. In the initial years, central office teams led attendance efforts; today, school site teams are responsible for managing attendance, supported by a district training team that provides guidance and technical assistance in attendance improvement throughout the year. This shift has strengthened school-level ownership while maintaining consistency in practice across the district.

In 2022, 23% of Ontario-Montclair Unified students were chronically absent (missing at least 10% of school days). By 2025, that number had dropped to 7%, representing a major improvement in overall attendance in the district.

New Technology to Support Attendance

The district is piloting an artificial intelligence-supported attendance system that combines automated outreach to families and data analysis. The system sends real-time text messages to families when a student is marked absent. Parents or guardians can respond via text, in their preferred language, clarifying why the student is absent that day. The platform then translates the messages for the attendance clerks, who monitor the messaging system, responding to families as needed. Most families in Ontario-Montclair select Spanish or Mandarin, although many other languages are available.

Behind the scenes, the platform provides reports to attendance teams, helping identify reasons for absences and surface student needs early. The system tracks and organizes data, flagging students with high absence rates. This information helps attendance intervention teams provide support to students and families much earlier than they might typically intervene. The system can analyze

data, identify patterns early, and offers suggestions for what kind of interventions might be most effective for each student.

This early insight allows intervention teams to begin with clear information on student needs, reducing time spent on outreach and enabling faster, more targeted responses. For example, if a family does not respond to text messages, the intervention team will plan for a higher touch strategy, such as a home visit, instead of continuing to reach out by text. This saves staff time because instead of a staff member trying multiple times to contact a family, the automated system will contact families and flag when parents do not respond. The system has significantly reduced workload and stress for clerical staff while streamlining intervention planning for attendance teams.

Collective Responsibility to Improve Attendance

The AI-enabled platform is being piloted in a small group of schools and is positioned as time-saving support, not a replacement for human relationships. It also improves system consistency by requiring timely and accurate attendance reporting, pushing staff toward more proactive practices. The district complements this system with broader engagement strategies, such as incentives for students with improved attendance, welcoming school environments, and professional development for staff on best practice, replicable and scalable strategies to reinforce consistent attendance.

The district coordinates a sustained, system-wide effort to prioritize attendance as a shared responsibility. “Every day matters” messaging is timed strategically throughout the school year, with targeted outreach during time periods associated with dips in attendance, such as Fridays before 3-day weekends and around spring break.

Attendance has also been embedded into the district’s broader strategic direction. It is explicitly included as a metric in the district’s 5-year action plan, with clear goals set at the system level. Responsibility for meeting those goals is distributed across departments, reinforcing that attendance is not the sole responsibility of individual schools or front-office staff, but a district-wide priority. For example, the food and nutrition department has reorganized its menu to serve the most popular meals on Fridays, which tend to be high-absenteeism days. Bus drivers hand out stickers and other prizes to students as they board buses, ensuring that students feel welcome and valued before they even reach school.

Final Takeaways

Ontario-Montclair Unified shows how effective attendance strategies can be bolstered and streamlined through technological advances. Adopting a new system to communicate with families allows staff more time to provide direct support to families. This shift enables the district to build on its successful foundation to sustain attendance improvements in the long-term by providing a relationship-forward solution to family communication. Together, the technology-enabled attendance infrastructure pairs with the relationship-building efforts throughout the district to engage students and families in the school community.

Lessons Learned

1. *Technology solutions should enable human connection.* Automatic texting creates approachable and bidirectional communication between staff and families, but it should encourage relationship building rather than replace it.

2. *Include attendance in strategic plans*. Reducing chronic absence requires commitment from all partners. Adding attendance goals to district strategic plans builds accountability throughout the district.

3. *Connection is the best prevention*. Encouraging staff to contribute to attendance strategies through creative engagement, student connection, and awareness fosters attendance improvements.

Notice of Trademark: "American Institutes for Research" and "AIR" are registered trademarks. All other brand, product, or company names are trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners.

The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Department). The Department does not mandate or prescribe practices, models, or other activities described or discussed in this document. The contents of this document may contain examples of, adaptations of, and links to resources created and maintained by another public or private organization. The Department does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this outside information. The content of this document does not necessarily represent the policy of the Department. This publication is not intended to represent the views or policy of, or be an endorsement of any views expressed, or materials provided by, any Federal agency. © 2026 American Institutes for Research®.

30708_10/26