



TOMAS OVALLE / THE FRESNO BEE

Kindergartner Mark Montano, right, and his brother, first-grader Jacob Bosquez, look out from their porch. Central Unified school officials came to the boys' home to speak with their mother, Christina Aguirre, about her sons missing their classes in school.

## **Truancy gets a wake-up call in Central Unified**

### **School officials know the children must be in the classrooms before they can learn from their teachers' lessons and advance in life.**

By Anne Dudley Ellis / The Fresno Bee

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Central Unified paid surprise visits to 40 homes throughout the district Wednesday as part of Operation Wake Up, a campaign targeting chronically truant students.

Twenty staffers, including an attendance secretary, the food services director and assistant superintendents, carried out the unusual undertaking starting about 9 a.m., seeking students from nearly every school in the widespread, 88-square-mile district west of Freeway 99.

"We know we've got to have the kids there for the kids to learn," said Chris Williams, assistant superintendent of human resources.

The truancy teams found sick students, kids who had missed the bus and others who had no good reason for skipping school. Buses were dispatched to pick up four students. Most parents were receptive to the visits; one parent was unhappy, Williams said.

Operation Wake Up is part of an anti-truancy campaign launched this year -- dubbed Every Day Counts -- as the district combats lost dollars and instructional time among its 13,500 students. Although the Central Unified School District has better attendance than most of the larger districts in the central San Joaquin Valley, it still lost nearly \$3 million last year in state attendance money and students lost 524,271 hours of instructional time.

The district plans another round of surprise visits in the spring, district spokeswoman Courtney Roque-Bautista said.

Roque-Bautista and athletics/P.E. coordinator James Gambrell teamed to visit four homes Wednesday where students had a history of chronic absences -- six or more unexcused absences a year.

At a home near Madison Elementary School, Roque-Bautista and Gambrell drove up and saw kindergartner Mark Montano playing on the porch with a toy mower. His mother, Christina Aguirre, said that both Mark and her first-grade son, Jacob Bosquez, had stayed home because their asthma had flared.

She said her sons need medication, but she had not filled out the required paperwork so they can take the medicine at school. Gambrell told Aguirre that she needs to get the boys to school and to call if they're going to be absent. He also told her that it would only take a few minutes to fill out the paperwork for the medicine.

The boys had each missed about 10 days of school since Oct. 9, Roque-Bautista said. As she talked with the district officials, Aguirre decided Jacob and Mark were well enough to attend school, and a bus arrived to pick them up.

At another visit, sixth-grader Gurpreet Johal said he missed the bus because he had overslept, and he had no one to take him to school. He attends Polk Elementary School.

He said his mother's job often takes her out of town, leaving him at home with his grandfather, who recently immigrated to the United States and speaks little English. He said his grandfather did not wake him up in time. Gambrell called an uncle of Gurpreet's to bring the boy to school but he was working, so a Central Unified bus was dispatched.

Roque-Bautista and Gambrell said they were pleased at parents' reaction to the surprise visits.

"They listened to what we had to say and appeared to want to do better," Roque-Bautista said. "For some of these families, you see what a chore it is to get the kids to school every day.

"We want the families to know we notice when their children aren't in school."

Roque-Bautista said that Central Unified Superintendent Marilou Ryder has made attendance a primary focus. Ryder has been dismayed by "a national epidemic of valuing education less and less," Roque-Bautista said.

Central Unified had a 95.4% attendance rate last school year, which assistant superintendent Williams said is already up to 96% this school year because of anti-truancy efforts.

The district this year is allowing campuses to keep half of the money from improved attendance, prompting schools to raffle off iPod nanos and pass out other rewards to students for improved attendance, Williams said. The district wants to hit 97% attendance next year.

Fast-growing Central Unified School District is roughly bounded by Freeway 99 on the east and reaches as far north as the San Joaquin River, as far west as Sycamore Avenue and as far south as American Avenue.

The reporter can be reached at [aellis@fresnobee.com](mailto:aellis@fresnobee.com) or (559) 441-6328.

**MORE INFORMATION**

**2006-07 school year**

Average daily attendance rate

**Central Unified:** 95.4%

**Clovis Unified:** 95.8%

**Fresno Unified:** 94.1%

**Madera Unified:** 95%

**Visalia Unified:** 95.2%

Source: Area school districts