A growing number of school districts and public agencies in Los Angeles County have joined a campaign to take a less punitive and more holistic approach to truancy -- and education officials insist it's paying off.

School officials from all over the county held a news conference Tuesday at the Centinela Valley Center for the Arts in Lawndale to tout what they call the "I'm In" campaign, which essentially favors rewarding kids for attending school over punishing them for skipping. The campaign also encourages school districts to refer truant kids to counselors or social service agencies rather than suspending them or slapping them with a $250 citation.

"If a kid is told, 'If you miss school, we are going to suspend or expel you,' you are doing exactly what you were trying to avoid," said Kostas Kalaitzidis, spokesman for the Los Angeles County Office of Education. "Unless you get to the root cause, you can't solve it."

The "I'm In" initiative began a year ago and now includes 25 school districts in Los Angeles County, the biggest of them being the Los Angeles Unified School District. Last year, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors joined the effort, declaring September to be School Attendance Month.

It's the same movement, for instance, that in the LAUSD culminated last year with a drawing for a brand-new car. The two winners, Vanessa Umana from Francis Polytechnic Senior High in Sun Valley and Euri Tanaka from San Pedro Senior High, were among 357 students who were allowed to enter for having perfect school attendance from October through April.

Last year, LAUSD witnessed a 3 percent improvement in school attendance, with 68 percent of the students showing up for at least 96 percent of the days -- a result officials attribute largely to the campaign. Among the new efforts is a policy by the campus police department -- the largest of its kind in the nation -- to refer truant students to school counselors instead of to the courts. Similarly, the district's police force in two years has cut by 55 percent the number of citations it issues to students for being truant.

On Friday, LAUSD officials will knock on doors to find students who are skipping school. LAUSD school board member Monica Garcia said it can be an enlightening experience.

"I've found kids who want to get back into school, who felt a little uncomfortable, or anxious, and didn't know if they could," she said. "Maybe they became parents or took on jobs, or maybe they were very far behind. Maybe they had issues with law enforcement. But there was always a solution."
Torrance Unified also is a member of the consortium, even though Superintendent George Mannon said attendance in the 24,000-student district is already first-rate.

"Our attendance rate is always in the high 90s -- as high as 98 percent at some schools -- and people ask us how we do it," Mannon said. "No. 1 -- and the most important -- is parents. Our community believes our kids should be in school."

In Covina-Valley Unified, another member of the group, attendance has improved nearly a full percentage point, to more than 97 percent, and academic performance is on the rise as well, said Jennifer Root, director of student services.

The district has a mentoring program for high school students and also has been providing incentives -- such as snacks and pencils as a treat -- to encourage perfect attendance.

"It's not just about one month -- it's all 10 months, 180 days that students can attend school," Root said.

Baldwin Park Unified averages a 96 percent attendance rate, and hopes to ratchet that up to 97 percent during the monthlong campaign, "On Time, In Class Every Day."

"We believe that every student counts," said Stephen Bayne, the district's senior director of business services. "It's important that every student be registered and come to school and have the opportunity to graduate and move into jobs or higher education."

Bayne said truancy problems typically begin to surface in the latter years of elementary school or during junior high, so the district puts a special focus on attendance during the primary grades.

Youngsters with perfect attendance get entered in a drawing for prizes like bicycles and gift certificates, which are donated by local merchants.

On Tuesday morning in Lawndale, mingling with all the men and women in business attire was a 17-year-old student dressed smartly in a shirt and tie. The student, Eddie Flores, said he spent his first couple of years at Fremont High in South Los Angeles playing hooky every day.

"I would hop the fence -- I would just leave," he said.

Through the "I'm In" campaign, he was put in touch with Josof Sanchez, the 62-year-old founder of Operation Street Kidz, a nonprofit group that gets wayward kids back on track.

Sanchez, who as a kid lost his own father to a heroin overdose, knows how to identify with youngsters like Eddie, whose mother had him when she was just 13 years old.

"Where there's trauma in the home, there is drama in the classroom," he said. "We teach them how to have a positive mindset. ... We tell them: Attitude, attitude, attitude determines their altitude."
Operation Street Kidz, which has connections to the entertainment industry, put Eddie in touch with a group of filmmakers who included Eddie as an extra in their short film. Eddie also appeared in a rap video.

Eddie is now attending a charter high school in Inglewood called Free LA High.

"I realized that by skipping school I was ending up losing," Eddie said. "The teachers get paid no matter what, if I go or if I don't. My payment is my education."