MySchoolPort

RESEARCH BRIEF

The Community Dividend

How families who know each other build stronger, better-funded schools.

When parents feel connected to one another, they show up, they volunteer, and they give. Six decades of social-science research explain why — and what it means for your school's community and its funding.

A MySchoolPort research brief · For school leaders, PTA/PTO boards, and education foundations
Prepared June 2026

Executive summary

Decades of research in sociology, education, and philanthropy converge on a simple idea: **relationships among families are the hidden engine of a healthy school community.**

When parents know one another, they form what sociologist James Coleman called "social capital" — a web of trust and shared expectations that measurably benefits children.[1,2] Parents with larger, denser social networks are significantly more involved in their children's education, both at home and at school.[3] And the two behaviors every parent group depends on — *volunteering* and *giving* — are driven less by mass appeals than by a personal ask from someone you already know.[7,8,9]

51	**Most**	**#1**
studies reviewed linking family engagement to higher achievement[5]	charitable gifts are made in response to a personal solicitation[8]	predictor of volunteering is being personally asked[7,9]

The implication for schools and education nonprofits is direct: **investing in the relationships among your families is not a "soft" nicety — it is the groundwork for involvement, volunteer turnout, and fundraising.** This brief reviews the evidence and closes with how a private community platform puts it to work.

1. When families know each other, children benefit

The foundational idea comes from sociologist **James S. Coleman**. In his theory of *social capital*, the relationships among the adults around a child — especially among parents who know each other — create trust, shared norms, and informal accountability that help children thrive.[1] Coleman called the ideal condition **"intergenerational closure"**: when the parents of a child's friends also know one another, the community can reinforce consistent expectations.

Studying public and private high schools with Thomas Hoffer, Coleman argued that schools embedded in such **"functional communities"** — where families are connected to each other, not just to the school — showed stronger engagement and lower dropout rates, a pattern they observed in close-knit parish schools.[2]

Robert Putnam's landmark *Bowling Alone* extended the concept to American life broadly, documenting how social capital — the networks and norms of reciprocity that bind a community — predicts everything from civic participation to child welfare, and warning that these ties have frayed over recent decades.[4]

> *"Social capital… refers to connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." — Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone*[4]

2. Connected parents show up

The most direct evidence for our thesis comes from **Steven B. Sheldon's** study in *The Elementary School Journal*. Examining parents' social networks, Sheldon found that **parents with larger social networks were significantly more involved in their children's education** — both at home and at the school.[3] In other words, knowing other families is not a by-product of involvement; it is a *predictor* of it.

That involvement matters. The most cited synthesis in the field, **Henderson & Mapp's *A New Wave of Evidence*** (a review of 51 studies for SEDL), concluded that students with engaged families — regardless of income or background — tend to earn higher grades, attend more regularly, and stay in school longer.[5]

How a school cultivates that engagement is the life's work of **Joyce Epstein** and the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins. Epstein's framework of six types of involvement treats parent-to-parent connection and community as core ingredients of an effective partnership program, not an afterthought.[6]

An honest note on cause and effect. Much of this evidence is correlational: connected, involved families differ from disconnected ones in other ways too (time, resources, prior comfort with school). The research supports a strong, consistent association — and a plausible causal pathway — but giving families tools to connect should be understood as *removing friction* from a known driver of engagement, not a guaranteed lever on test scores.

3. Connected parents volunteer

Every PTA, booster club, and foundation runs on volunteers — and volunteering is profoundly social. In *Volunteers: A Social Profile*, sociologists Marc Musick and John Wilson show that **social resources — the size and reach of a person's networks — are among the strongest predictors of who volunteers.**[7] People embedded in community simply have more on-ramps.

The mechanism is almost mundane: **people volunteer because they are asked**, usually by someone they already know. National civic-life research finds that a personal invitation is the single most reliable trigger for volunteering, and roughly one in four U.S. adults formally volunteers in a given year.[9,10] A school where families are strangers has no one to do the asking; a connected community asks itself.

> *A roster of email addresses cannot ask anyone to help. A community can — and does.*

4. Connected parents give

The same dynamic governs fundraising. In the most comprehensive review of why people give — **Bekkers & Wiepking's** synthesis of empirical philanthropy research — *solicitation* ranks among the eight core mechanisms that drive charitable giving. Their finding is blunt: **the large majority of charitable donations are made in response to a personal ask**, and social networks are a primary channel through which those asks travel.[8]

For a school, the takeaway is encouraging. You do not need a bigger appeal; you need a more connected one. Gifts — of money, time, and goodwill — flow along relationships. The stronger the relationships among your families, the more fertile the ground for every campaign, sponsorship drive, and annual fund.

5. The gap: isolation and the new-family problem

If connection is the engine, isolation is the brake. Putnam's central warning was that community ties have weakened over time, leaving more people loosely attached to the institutions in their lives.[4] Schools feel this acutely with **new families**, who arrive each year knowing no one and often never break in — precisely the families least likely to volunteer or give, not for lack of willingness but for lack of a relationship.

National survey data capture the pattern: most parents will attend a general school event, but a much smaller share volunteer regularly or serve on committees — the deeper involvement that depends on feeling like you belong.[11] Closing that gap is less about communication and more about *connection*: helping families find each other.

6. What this means for your school

The research points to a practical strategy. To strengthen involvement, volunteering, and giving, **start by helping your families build relationships with one another.** Three moves follow directly from the evidence:

Make families visible to each other

A private directory turns a roster into a community — parents can put names to faces, find their children's classmates' families, and reach the people they already share a school with (Coleman's intergenerational closure, in practice).[1,3]

Welcome new families on day one

Give newcomers an immediate way to belong, so the families most prone to isolation become participants rather than strangers.[4,11]

Let the community do the asking

Because volunteering and giving follow personal, networked asks, a connected community is also your most effective fundraising and volunteer base.[7,8,9]

How MySchoolPort applies the research

MySchoolPort is a private community platform built on exactly this evidence. A searchable, opt-in family directory and shared events help your families genuinely know one another; staff and coach directories and resources give them a common home; and a built-in local-business deals book turns that connected community into recurring funding — money that flows, as the research predicts, along relationships. It runs on any phone, tablet, or computer, and a single volunteer can manage it.

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About this brief. Findings are summarized from the published works above and represent established, widely-cited research. Some links point to publisher or agency landing pages; specific figures and primary sources should be confirmed against the originals before external publication or citation in formal proposals.

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