

# Family Connection Program

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*Jefferson Junior High School  
Naperville, Illinois*

**T**he Family Connection Program at Jefferson Junior High School is tackling an old problem with a new strategy. The problem is families who need financial help for school expenses. The families and staff of Jefferson have been helping their friends and neighbors who may have lost a job or encountered other financial problems. Family Connection is a group of Jefferson students, families, staff members, and business partners working together to lend a helping hand to families facing difficult circumstances.

Though the Family Connection Program is new, the junior high's willingness to help those in need is not. Jefferson's students come from a broad socioeconomic base. For many years, the school social worker and teachers identified families who could use help, and a guidance counselor compiled a list of their needs. They then collected money and goods throughout the school year, storing the items, shopping for new ones, and sharing them as needed.

This year the school took a new approach—collecting gift cards or money to buy gift cards rather than collecting food and clothing for these families. “The gift cards enabled recipients to shop for the items they needed and liked,” said one of the Family Connection members. They also eliminated a storage-space problem at the school.

“We were looking for a way to streamline the manner in which we provide assistance to Jefferson students and their families in times of need,” said a program participant. The Fam-

ily Connection gift card drive took only three days. The drive was publicized through morning announcements, newspaper stories, student posters, and a prerecorded phone message that reached more than 90 percent of Jefferson's families.

Everyone was encouraged to donate money or gift cards for grocery stores or discount retailers. The first-period teachers collected the money and gift cards each morning. The money was used to buy more gift cards. Connection members set a dollar amount, based on family size, for the initial distribution. Social workers contacted the recipient families and distributed cards.

The gift card drive raised \$400 and a lot of good feelings. “I usually give to several other organizations, but decided that Family Connection was a great cause, so it's all going to that,” said a teacher. One parent took real pleasure in the drive: “I was so proud of my son when he said he donated his own money. He told me, ‘It's a great way to help students at Jefferson, Mom.’”

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