

Family Connection

*Naperville North High School
Naperville, Illinois*

Collaboration is the name of the game at Naperville North High School (NNHS). The Family Connection, a team of NNHS families who reach out to others in need of immediate economic help, recently joined with the School/Family/Community Partnership (SFCP) team to strengthen its connections with other school leaders, build sustainability and gain recognition.

Family Connection was born out of a NNHS parent's desire to find new ways to support struggling families during trying economic times. Throughout the year, whenever the school nurse, guidance counselors, teachers, social worker or community partners identified critical needs, the Family Connection team responded by providing basic resources such as food, fuel and clothing. The school health office notified the team of specific needs that were initially identified by Naperville North's nursing staff or the Naperville City Police Department.

Families who required economic assistance were noted in a database for assistance from volunteers. Team members donated gift cards from grocery stores, pharmacies, gas stations and other retail outlets. Database volunteers choose when and how much help to give each family, with complete privacy guaranteed.

The health office staff distributed the gift cards directly to the family to help them meet short-term needs. They also connected families to area social service agencies for long-term help. Students who come to school hungry receive lunch vouchers and food, including breakfast bars, which are often donated.

"I can't believe people would be this generous," said one recipient. A student whose family received assistance cried after learning that someone wanted to help.

Another recipient was thrilled: "I was in utter shock to open the gift cards and see such

an enormous amount. I jumped for joy," she said. "Simply saying 'Thank You' does not seem to be nearly enough for the unselfish acts of kindness that people have bestowed upon my family."

As a result of the team's hard work, 40 families received Thanksgiving dinners, 47 were served at Christmas and 53 families received additional aid throughout the year.

The needs of families and the Family Connection team's ability to meet those needs continue to grow every year. There was a 900 percent increase in the number of families served from the first year to the fifth year of this program. About 180 families volunteered to join or donate to the team's work.

The project has many positive outcomes. Families in need receive immediate help. This frees them to find long-term solutions to their economic problems. Those who donate, especially students, realize they can make a difference in others' lives. Besides being an example of charity and compassion at NNHS, the SFCP team and the program have inspired other schools in Naperville District 203 to adopt the model.

"Family Connection goes way beyond helping families," said the school nurse. "It helps us live with ourselves, knowing that our students' families' immediate needs have been met."

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