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# School Parent Networks Do Not Boost Children's Grades

**Schools are increasingly praised for investing in parent networks. The idea is intuitive: when parents know each other, children thrive. But does the evidence actually support this?**

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When asked what makes a school great, many people will mention a strong sense of community, meaning parents who know each other and who know the teachers. Building connections among parents is widely considered a way to benefit children. But does a tighter community actually translate into better outcomes for kids?

This idea has deep roots in educational sociology. Back in the 1980s, the influential sociologist James Coleman developed the concept of "social capital" in schools (Coleman, 1988). His argument was compelling: schools with denser networks, between parents, between school and families, and between students, are thought to create a shared normative framework in which children grow up safely and perform better academically. The idea is that when parents know each other, pro-school norms spread more easily. Good behaviour is modelled across households, and misconduct is more readily discouraged.

Yet how well does this theoretical expectation hold up under empirically? Sociologists and education researchers now use more rigorous methods to test this appealing model. Several recent studies, using causal designs that control for unobserved differences between students, find little to no effect of parent network integration on academic achievement. One Dutch study found that once such differences are accounted for, the association between intergenerational networks and school performance disappears (Geven & Van De Werfhorst, 2020). A randomised experiment in the United States testing an after-school parent engagement programme similarly found no improvements in learning outcomes (Gamoran et al., 2021). Even research on the COVID-19 pandemic, which might have been expected to reveal whether parent networks helped mitigate their children's educational setbacks, found that parent networks made no measurable difference in the transition from primary to secondary school (Van De Werfhorst et al., 2024).

This research does not suggest that parent networks are without value. Networks around schools may well matter for other outcomes: a broader sense of belonging, mutual tolerance, children's exposure to diverse ways of life. These are goals worth pursuing in their own right, and schools should feel encouraged to invest in community-building for social and inclusion-related reasons.

However, current evidence provides little support for the claim that stronger parent networks, by themselves, lead to improved academic performance. This means schools should be cautious about framing community-building primarily as an educational achievement strategy. The real challenge for schools and policymakers is not how to make parents better acquainted, but how to address the structural inequalities that drive differences in school performance in the first place. Community is worth building but it is not a substitute for tackling inequality at its roots.

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## NOTE

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