

Community Solutions for the School Budget Crisis

A Resource-Optimized Model for District Stability
Bridging the Budget Gap through Community-Led Infrastructure
& Shared Service Grants

schools.siliconsaga.net

April 2026

Executive Summary

A Resource-Optimized Model for District Stability

Bridging the Budget Gap through Community-Led Infrastructure & Shared Service Grants

The district is projecting a deficit of up to \$15 million^[1] heading into 2026-2027, driven in large part by health benefits expected to climb nearly 18%^[2]. The proposed response - eliminating dozens of positions^[3], outsourcing paraprofessionals, and shrinking instructional time - treats the budget as a closed system with no outside inputs.

It is not a closed system. The community possesses a surplus of specialized skills, labor, and capital that remains untapped due to legacy procurement constraints and outdated governance processes. This is not unique to our district - schools across Essex County^[4] and statewide^[5] face similar crises, driven in part by a state funding formula that requires local contributions to grow faster than the 2% tax cap allows. Groups like West Orange Parents for Education^[6] are advocating for state-level reform to address the structural root cause. **This proposal focuses on what the community can do locally, right now**, regardless of what happens in Trenton.

The core idea: The community builds a **Community Exoskeleton** - a support structure around the district. PTAs, sports leagues, student volunteers, and community organizations absorb the functions they're equipped to handle: enrichment, athletics, photography, grounds maintenance, fundraising, grant writing. The district then focuses its limited budget on the things only a district can do - certified teachers, paraprofessional relationships, IEP compliance, and core instruction.

One person put these documents together in a few hours over a few days using modern tools. If one person can produce this much in that little time, imagine what a whole community can do. The expertise is already here - in healthcare, finance, law, athletics, technology, and education. It just needs coordination and an open door from the district.

This proposal outlines **cost-avoidance modules**, **structural reforms**, and **community partnership models**. The full document set is available on this site; a printed subset accompanies the board presentation.

The Core Modules

Immediate Cost-Avoidance

- 1. The Instructional Bridge Grant** - The PTA establishes a "Curriculum Preservation Fund" to cover the cost difference between the proposed 30-minute special area classes and the current 45-minute standard. Teachers remain district employees; only the funding source changes for the marginal 15 minutes. (Precedent: Palo Alto PiE funds 250+ positions at ~\$5.5M/year.^[7])
- 2. The Open Image Project** - Replace outsourced school photography (e.g. Lifetouch) with a community-run, digital-first platform. The PTA captures revenue directly, eliminates third-party student data monetization, and generates a recurring funding stream to support Module 1.
- 3. Community Maintenance Layer** - Crowdsourced groundskeeping via volunteer SLAs, eliminating the contractor premium inflated by the municipal gas blower ban^[8].
- 4. Paraprofessional Retention** - Redirect savings from other modules to retain in-house special education staff. Outsourcing creates high turnover, wipes IEP institutional memory, and exposes the district to compensatory education lawsuits and costly out-of-district placements.

Structural Reforms

5. **Health Insurance Transparency** - Request broker compensation disclosure. Evaluate the NJ State Health Benefits Plan (which has saved SEHBP employers \$462.7 million statewide^[9] through Ch.44 reforms), health insurance consortiums, self-funding, and Direct Primary Care. The Perth Amboy district missed \$49M in savings^[10] due to broker conflicts. If our broker is paid a percentage of the premium, they have a conflict of interest that may be costing teachers their jobs.

6. **Open Governance Pilot** - Move the "grinding" - data gathering, vendor comparisons, community proposals - into a public, version-controlled repository. The board meeting becomes a Sprint Review for final approvals and community celebration, not a midnight marathon of repetitive 3-minute soundbites.

Community Partnerships

7. **Community Sports & Athletics** - Volunteer sports leagues can absorb athletic programs the district can no longer fund, through shared-use agreements, league-operated school teams, and high school students serving as junior coaches. This demonstrates the multi-organization exoskeleton model: the PTA handles enrichment, sports leagues handle athletics, and the district protects what only the district can do.

The Ask

We are not asking the board to do more. We are asking the board to let the community do more. The exoskeleton is being built. We need:

- **Collaboration** - a Designated Liaison from the board to work with community groups between meetings, so we're not starting from zero every month
- **Transparency** - vendor contracts and broker commissions disclosed (via the attached RFI templates) so we can identify savings together
- **Willingness to shift** - if the community can absorb enrichment, athletics, and maintenance costs, redirect those savings to the positions we cannot replace: paraprofessionals, certified teachers, core instruction

The district does not need to take on the task of fleshing out these proposals. The community does - people with relevant expertise donating their time because their kids are in these schools. The board's role is to coordinate with us and accept the help.

Additional Modules (on the full site)

This executive summary covers the core proposals. The full document set includes additional modules on:

- **Energy & Facilities** - Solar PPAs that saved NJ districts millions
- **Cooperative Purchasing & Shared Services** - DCA SHARE grants, \$28M+ in documented savings
- **Community Grant Writing** - turning parent expertise into a permanent revenue pipeline
- **Regulatory Leverage** - NJ Best Practices checklist, banked tax levy cap, NJQSAC
- **Open Budget & Participatory Finance** - OpenCollective, participatory budgeting, budget visualization
- **Technical Design Plans** - platform architecture for developers and technical volunteers

Prepared by Rasmus Praestholm - West Orange parent, PTA member, and youth sports volunteer. These proposals are aspirational and represent one community member's research into options. No organizations have been committed, and no promises are made about outcomes. The goal is to start a conversation about what the community can do to help. Full site: schools.siliconsaga.net

Module 1: The Instructional Bridge Grant

Preserving Art & Library through Community-Sponsored Excellence

The Problem

The district proposes reducing elementary special area classes (Art, Library) from 45 minutes to 30 minutes. This may sound like a minor schedule adjustment, but the staffing implications are significant.

The math: If a teacher has 300 instructional minutes per day:

- At 45 minutes per class: ~6.6 classes covered
- At 30 minutes per class: ~10 classes covered

By trimming 15 minutes, the district gets 50% more throughput from each teacher, which enables reducing Art and Library staff. The community's question is whether there's a way to preserve the full 45 minutes without the district bearing the full cost.

The Proposal: Grant-in-Aid Service Preservation

The PTA establishes a **Curriculum Preservation Fund** - a targeted grant to the district that funds the cost difference between the 30-minute state-compliant minimum and the 45-minute instructional standard.

How It Works

1. The PTA (leveraging existing reserves and new fundraising) issues a restricted grant to the district
2. The grant is legally bound to fund only the 15-minute instructional gap for special area staff
3. Teachers remain **district employees** - no union, benefit, or liability complications
4. The district's General Fund sees relief; the community sees zero change in service

The Math

The gap cost for each affected position:

$$C_{\text{gap}} = \text{Teacher Hourly Rate} \times 0.25 \text{ hours} \times \text{Total Sections per Day} \times \text{School Days}$$

This is a fraction of a full salary since we are funding only the marginal 15 minutes, not the full position.

Legal Considerations (New Jersey)

The NJ "Thorough and Efficient" (T&E;) clause prohibits charging parents for core curriculum during the school day. The Bridge Grant avoids this by:

- Flowing funds through the PTA as a **grant to the district**, not a fee to parents
- Keeping instruction within the official school day under district supervision
- Preserving certified teacher delivery (not replacing with volunteers)

Alternative: The "After-School Lease" Model

If the grant mechanism proves too slow for district procurement:

1. The district shortens the official school day (e.g. ending at 2:30 PM)

2. The PTA leases classroom space for \$1/year after the bell
3. The PTA directly contracts the same teachers for "Enrichment" programming
4. All students participate; paying families cover costs, PTA reserves cover the rest

The result: the same teachers, the same kids, the same classrooms - just funded differently. Staff stay employed, the district's books are balanced, and children don't notice a thing. Optional enrichment activities already happen after school.

Union Alignment

This model **protects union seniority** by keeping teachers as district employees (or, in the lease model, maintaining their employment relationship with a community organization). The teachers' union should be a strong ally here - their members keep their positions, and the funding source is the only thing that changes.

Precedent: Palo Alto Partners in Education

This is not hypothetical. Palo Alto Partners in Education (PiE)^[7] raises approximately \$5.5 million per year and funds over 250 positions districtwide - art teachers, classroom aides, and elective classes. In 2002, the Palo Alto school board ruled that PTA-raised funds for extra staff must be centrally raised and evenly distributed to address equity concerns. Portland, Oregon adopted a similar pooling model in the 1990s^[11].

See Module 14: The PTA as Community Operating System for the full operational model using OpenCollective.

Module 2: The Open Image Project

Data & Revenue Reclamation through Community-Run School Photography

The Problem

The district contracts with vendors like Lifetouch/Shutterfly for school photography. These contracts are characterized by:

- **Low kickbacks** to the district relative to the vendor's markup
- **Third-party monetization** of student biometric data (facial images) / vendor retains copyright for pictures of *your* kid
- **Overpriced packages** that many families skip or resent
- **No digital originals** provided to families without premium payment (or simply not at all)

The district treats this as a minor convenience contract. It is actually a revenue leak and a data liability.

The Proposal: Community-Owned Digital Photography

The PTA takes over school photography using volunteer photographers (parents who are professionals or skilled hobbyists) and a simple digital distribution platform.

How It Works

1. **Volunteer photographers** execute Picture Day, coordinated through a scheduling platform. QR code flyers go home in every student's bag.
2. **Digital originals** are available to families for a modest PTA donation -- significantly less than Lifetouch packages, with every dollar going back to the school (via the PTA) rather than a national corporation.
3. **Prints as desired** Families who want prints take their digitals to any print service they choose. No predatory upselling, no locked-in vendor packages.
4. The School/PTA captures **100% of the donation** with no vendor middleman.

Revenue Model: Photos as Fundraiser

This isn't a photo business - it's a fundraiser with a clear purpose. The pitch to parents: "Every dollar you spend on school photos goes directly to keeping teachers in the building."

The model borrows from what some PTAs already do with membership fees: a suggested donation covers your family's photos, and an optional second contribution sponsors photos for a family that can't afford it. No child goes without a school photo, and no parent is pressured into a \$50+ package they don't want.

The actual donation amount depends on the district's enrollment and the current vendor contract terms (obtainable via RFI Template A). The key principle: when the middleman is gone, the community keeps revenue that currently flows to a corporation - and that revenue funds the Instructional Bridge Grant.

Data Sovereignty

The community-run platform includes an explicit privacy guarantee:

"Data persistence is localized to the district. No student biometric data is hashed, sold, or used for third-party AI training or marketing."

This is a significant selling point for privacy-conscious families **and** a liability reduction for the board. Most districts have not audited what Lifetouch does with student facial data.

The Platform

The digital distribution platform can be built rapidly using modern tools:

- Privacy-first architecture with local data storage
- Simple upload, browse, and download workflow
- Payment processing for the optional donation
- No student data leaves the district's control

This serves as a proof-of-concept for the broader coordination platform - demonstrating that "the community is the platform."

What We Need from the Board

1. The current Lifetouch/photography vendor contract (via RFI Template A)
2. Commission and data-sharing disclosures
3. Willingness to let the PTA pilot for one cycle

Module 3: Community Maintenance Layer

Crowdsourced Groundskeeping to Eliminate Contractor Premiums

The Problem

West Orange's ban on gas-powered leaf blowers^[8] (effective January 1, 2026, after a phased rollout) has inflated commercial groundskeeping costs. Contractors are passing through the capital expense of new electric fleets and the added labor time of battery management. The district is absorbing this premium on top of an already strained budget. (There is also a statewide ban bill (S623)^[12] under consideration.)

The Proposal: Neighbors Taking Care of Their Schools

Parents already maintain the yards they live in - many within walking distance of the schools their kids attend every day. The equipment is already in the garage. The motivation is already there. What's missing is coordination and permission.

How It Works

1. A **simple sign-up system** (group chat, shared calendar, and/or scheduling app) coordinates which parents cover which school grounds on which weekends
2. Volunteers operate under a **Limited Service Waiver** - the same legal framework used for "Clean Communities" events and community garden workdays
3. Visible commitment tracking gives the board confidence that coverage is reliable, not just enthusiasm

Addressing Liability Concerns

The board may raise liability concerns. The response:

- NJ already has frameworks for volunteer service on public property (community gardens, Clean Communities events, school volunteer agreements)
- A **Special Event Waiver** or **Volunteer Service Agreement** bypasses commercial contracting red tape
- The risk profile of a parent blowing leaves off a school walkway is not materially different from a parent volunteering at a school event

The Coordination Problem

The board's likely concern is reliability: "Will people actually show up?" This is the exact problem a community coordination platform solves:

- **Commitment tracking** - residents digitally pledge specific hours
- **Scheduling visibility** - gaps are visible and fillable in advance
- **Accountability** - no-shows are noticed and covered by alternates

Why This Matters Beyond Leaves

The dollar savings on leaf blowing are modest. The strategic value is enormous:

- It proves that **community-led coordination works** at operational scale
- It establishes the legal and logistical template for future volunteer programs
- It demonstrates to the board that the community is a **resource**, not just a complaint department

Module 4: Paraprofessional Retention Audit

The Hidden Costs of Outsourcing Special Education Staff

The Problem

The district is considering eliminating paraprofessional positions and replacing them with staff from outsourcing agencies. On paper, this removes pension and benefit liabilities from the district's books.

We believe the hidden costs of this trade deserve close examination.

The Real Cost of Outsourcing

The Agency Markup

Outsourcing agencies typically take a significant markup on each worker - industry analyses commonly cite ranges of 30-40% or more. The actual paraprofessional sees a fraction of the hourly rate, often at levels that may be difficult to live on in this area, frequently without health benefits.

The predictable result:

- **High annual turnover** as workers leave for better opportunities
- Constant retraining cycles consuming district administrative time
- Declining quality of support as institutional knowledge evaporates

The "Technical Debt" of Special Education

For children with IEPs (Individualized Education Programs), continuity is not a luxury - it is a **clinical and legal requirement**.

Every time a paraprofessional leaves:

- The lived-experience for that child's needs, triggers, communication style, and progress is **wiped**
- The replacement starts from zero, and the child loses weeks or months of progress
- Parents must re-educate new staff on their child's specific needs

The Legal Exposure

IEP non-compliance due to staffing instability creates serious legal risk:

- **Compensatory education claims** from parents whose children regressed
- **Due Process hearings** that cost the district legal fees regardless of outcome
- **Out-of-district placements** if the district cannot demonstrate adequate in-house support - these placements are widely reported to cost districts six figures per student per year

A coordinated Due Process complaint from a group of parents could cost the district more in legal fees and remediation than the projected savings from the outsourcing contract.

The Human Cost

A paraprofessional who has worked with a child for years is not a line item. For a child who has known their para for a third of their life, that relationship is a foundation of their school experience - stability,

trust, and continuity that cannot be replicated by a rotating cast of agency temps.

Even if an existing para is offered to be re-hired by the new agency, their total compensation naturally falls, they may be forced to reject or leave anyway, and they have might to change their routine in negative ways to meet new agency rules.

The Proposal: The Community Shoulders What It Can

This is the heart of the exoskeleton model. The community takes over functions it's equipped to handle - enrichment, photography, maintenance, fundraising -- and the savings are redirected specifically to **retain in-house paraprofessionals**. These are the positions the community cannot replace, because they depend on years of relationship with individual children.

The Financial Case

The health insurance transparency review is the most likely source of savings large enough to cover paraprofessional retention. If our district's health costs are inflated by anything approaching the 18% excess found in Perth Amboy, the savings from switching plans or renegotiating broker terms could be substantial.

Combined with other cost-avoidance modules - energy savings (Module 7), community maintenance (Module 3), revenue from the Open Image Project, and grant funding (including IDEA grants specifically designed for special education) - the district has multiple avenues to preserve these positions without additional tax burden.

The community sports partnership model also provides an example of how a different community organization (a sports league rather than the PTA) can absorb district functions, freeing budget for higher priorities like paraprofessional retention.

What We Ask the Board

1. Publish the cost comparison: agency contract total vs. in-house employment total (including the agency's markup, not just the district's per-hour cost)
2. Disclose the projected turnover rate in the agency's proposal
3. Quantify the district's current spend on compensatory education and out-of-district placements attributable to staffing gaps

Module 5: Health Insurance Transparency & Alternatives

The Biggest Lever: Broker Conflicts, the State Plan, Consortiums, and Direct Primary Care

The Problem

Health insurance premium increases are cited as a primary driver of the district's deficit. Health benefits are expected to climb nearly 18%^[1] in the coming year. This is the single largest cost lever available - and a topic unlikely to have been exhaustively examined.

The district is not alone. Budget meltdowns are hitting schools across Essex County^[4] and statewide^[5], with health insurance consistently cited as a primary driver.

The Perth Amboy Precedent

In January 2026, State Auditor David Kaschak published an audit finding that the Perth Amboy school district missed \$49.1 million in potential savings^[10] by failing to switch to the NJ State Health Benefits Plan (SHBP/SEHBP) -- the state's largest and least expensive provider, covering 800,000 public employees, retirees, and their dependents.

The audit found Perth Amboy's health care costs were **18% higher than necessary** from fiscal years 2020 through 2024. The district's broker failed to run a cost comparison from 2020 through 2023. When the district finally ran one in 2024 and found it could save substantially, it was too late to switch for that year.

Worse: the auditors found the broker was **secretly receiving back-end sales commissions** from insurance companies and prescription drug providers -- payments that state law requires to be disclosed. These undisclosed commissions created a perverse incentive to seek more expensive coverage.

A subsequent whistleblower lawsuit^[13] alleged retaliation against an employee who raised insurance bidding and pay-to-play concerns.

Perth Amboy has since switched to the state health benefits system.

This is a structural conflict of interest, and it's not unique to Perth Amboy.

The Statewide Broker Problem

In September 2025, the NJ Office of the State Comptroller published a report^[14] on conflicts of interest and procurement violations in local government and school board health insurance funds. Key findings:

- The brokerage firm **Conner Strong & Buckelew (CSB)** and its affiliated entity **PERMA** improperly controlled multiple health insurance funds, including the **School Health Insurance Fund (SHIF)**
- From FY2021 to FY2025, SHIF paid these entities approximately **\$36 million** with undisclosed conflicts of interest
- CSB wrote RFPs, reviewed bids, and steered contracts to itself without adequate competition or disclosure
- The full report (PDF)^[15] documents how a proposed cooperative pricing system covering **40,000+ municipal employees** was tailored to favor existing vendors in violation of procurement law

- The Comptroller made referrals to the Department of Banking and Insurance, the Attorney General, and the School Ethics Commission

This is the systemic context. The question is whether our district's broker arrangement has similar issues. We won't know until we ask.

Questions Worth Exploring Together

1. **How is our broker compensated?** If the answer is "a percentage of the premium," the broker is paid more when our costs go up. That structure creates a conflict of interest worth examining.
2. **When was the last side-by-side comparison** between our current plan and the NJ State Health Benefits Plan? If one hasn't been done recently, that may be a significant opportunity.
3. **Has the board reviewed the State Comptroller's 2025 report** on health insurance fund conflicts? Does our district participate in any of the funds cited in that report?
4. **What is the total cost of broker services** - direct fees, commissions, and any back-end arrangements with carriers?

Alternative Models Worth Evaluating

The current model - a private broker selecting a fully-insured plan from a commercial carrier - is not the only option. Several alternatives have demonstrated savings for school districts in NJ and nationally.

Option A: The NJ State Health Benefits Plan (SEHBP)

The most direct alternative. The SEHBP is the state's largest health benefits program and benefits from massive pooling and negotiating power.

What's changed recently: In 2020, NJ passed Chapter 44^[16] health benefits reform legislation, restructuring the plans available under SEHBP. The reform introduced the NJ Educators Health Plan (NJEHP)^[17] designed specifically for school employees.

Documented savings: State actuaries validated that employers in the SEHBP saved \$462.7 million^[9] from Ch.44 changes - far surpassing the \$300 million target. Districts spending at or above their adequacy level must use savings for property tax relief; districts below adequacy can apply savings to educational programs.

The question: Is our district in the SEHBP, or are we on a private plan? If private, has a comparison been done? If not, why not?

Option B: Joint Insurance Funds / Health Insurance Consortiums

NJ law (N.J.S.A. 40A:10-36^[18]) allows school boards to jointly create self-insurance funds to pool risk and reduce costs. Several such funds exist:

- **SHIF** (School Health Insurance Fund) - serves member school districts
- **SNJHIF** (Southern NJ Regional Employee Benefits Fund) - 52 local government members, over \$70 million annual budget
- Various regional municipal employee benefit funds

How consortiums help: When multiple districts pool resources, they gain greater purchasing power, spread risk across a larger population, and can negotiate directly with providers. Claims tend to be

lower than in community-rated commercial plans.

The caveat: The State Comptroller's 2025 report found that some of these funds have their own conflict-of-interest problems. Any consortium arrangement should be evaluated for the same broker transparency issues we're raising about the current plan.

Option C: Self-Funded Insurance

In a self-funded model, the district acts as its own insurer - paying claims directly rather than paying premiums to a carrier.

Advantages:

- Eliminates the carrier's profit margin and state premium taxes
- District retains any surplus (in a fully-insured plan, surplus stays with the carrier)
- Greater transparency into actual claims data
- Can be paired with stop-loss insurance to cap catastrophic risk

Considerations:

- Works best with larger employee populations (several hundred+) where claims are statistically predictable
- Requires administrative infrastructure (often outsourced to a Third-Party Administrator)
- Carries financial risk if claims spike unexpectedly
- A district exploring this should obtain its own claims data history - which the current carrier may be reluctant to share

Who does this: Self-funding is common in larger school districts and municipalities nationally. In NJ, the joint insurance fund model (Option B) is a form of collective self-funding.

Option D: Direct Primary Care (DPC)

Direct Primary Care is a model where an employer contracts directly with a primary care provider for a fixed monthly fee per employee, covering routine primary care visits with no copays, no claims processing, and no insurance middleman.

How it works alongside insurance: DPC doesn't replace insurance - it supplements it. Employees get a high-deductible health plan (HDHP) for catastrophic/specialist coverage, plus DPC for routine care. Because DPC handles the majority of primary care visits outside the insurance system, claims drop and premiums decrease.

Documented example: Orange County Public Schools^[19] in Florida (24,000+ employees, eighth-largest district nationally) implemented an advanced primary care model and reports savings of up to 30% on healthcare costs. Over 17% of the workforce enrolled, with many employees who previously lacked an established primary care physician now receiving regular care.

The concept for our district: What if the district contracted with local independent clinics to provide DPC for staff?

- Small practices would value the stability of a guaranteed patient block
- The district gets predictable costs and healthier employees
- Insurance claims drop, which drives down premiums at renewal
- Employees get better access to care with shorter wait times

- Local economy benefits from keeping more healthcare dollars local

This is a longer-term initiative that requires feasibility study, but it represents the kind of creative thinking the board should be doing instead of defaulting to "the numbers are what they are."

Option E: Reference-Based Pricing

Rather than accepting whatever rates an insurance carrier negotiates with hospitals, the district (or its plan administrator) sets reimbursement rates based on a reference point - typically a percentage of Medicare rates (e.g., 150-200% of Medicare).

This is an emerging model in the self-funded space. It can dramatically reduce costs for high-ticket procedures (surgeries, hospital stays) where commercial insurance rates are often 300-500% of Medicare. It requires willingness to navigate balance billing disputes and may not be suitable as a first step, but it's worth understanding as part of the landscape.

The Scale of Potential Savings

We are not making specific dollar promises. What we are saying:

- Perth Amboy's costs were **18% higher than necessary** for four years - a figure remarkably close to our own district's projected premium increase
- Statewide Ch.44 reforms saved SEHBP employers **\$462.7 million**
- A single large district (Orange County, FL) reports **up to 30% savings** from advanced primary care
- The State Comptroller found **\$36 million in undisclosed payments** to conflicted vendors in just one set of health insurance funds

The question is not "can we save money on health insurance?" The question is "how much are we leaving on the table, and why hasn't anyone looked more?"

The Immediate Ask

File the RFI Template B requesting:

- Full broker compensation disclosure - direct fees, commissions, and any back-end arrangements with carriers
- Documentation of any SEHBP feasibility study or cost comparison
- Confirmation of whether the broker's pay structure creates a conflict of interest
- The district's claims history data (needed to evaluate self-funding or consortium options)

There are further support options to acquire this and similar information if needed.

References

- Perth Amboy missed \$49M (Jersey Vindicator, Jan 2026)^[10]
- Perth Amboy whistleblower suit (Jersey Vindicator, Feb 2026)^[13]
- NJ Comptroller: Health Insurance Fund conflicts (Sept 2025)^[14] | Full report PDF^[15]
- NJEA Ch.44 FAQs^[16] | SEHBP savings: \$462.7M^[9]
- NJ Educators Health Plan details (Horizon)^[17]
- NJSBA Cooperative Pricing System^[18]

- SEHBP overview (NJ Treasury)^[20]
- Orange County Public Schools DPC model (HR Executive)^[19]
- West Orange 18% premium increase (The Digest Online)^[1]

Module 6: Open Governance Pilot

From Midnight Marathons to Asynchronous Coordination

The Problem with the Current Model

The school board meeting is a **synchronous bottleneck**. When 50 people each deliver the same message in a 3-minute soundbite, the board is not receiving dialogue - it is experiencing a denial-of-service attack on its own attention.

By the time they reach "Old Business," cognitive load is maxed out, and the default is the safest, most litigation-proof option - which is usually the least creative one. Board members are exhausted, and residents feel unheard. Nobody wins.

Why Open Process Is Hard (Not Why It's Been Refused)

We don't assume the board is hiding things out of malice. There are real reasons open process is difficult for school boards:

1. Negotiating Sensitivity

Some budget details involve active negotiations (contracts, personnel, legal matters) where premature disclosure could genuinely harm the district's position. That's legitimate - but it doesn't justify keeping *everything* closed.

2. Fear of Draft Data

In an OPRA world, boards reasonably worry that documenting a creative-but-rejected idea creates a record that could be used against them. Ironically, the opposite is true: version-controlled decision history **proves due diligence** and shows the board considered alternatives before making hard choices.

3. Administrative Friction

"Transparency" currently means uploading a 200-page flattened PDF to a buried sub-menu. The tools available to the district make openness a chore rather than a default. This is where community technical capacity can help.

The Proposal: Board Meetings as Sprint Reviews

Move the grinding - data gathering, vendor comparisons, community proposals -- into a **public, version-controlled repository**. The meeting becomes a Sprint Review for final approvals and celebration.

Aspect	Legacy Model ("The Dais")	Open Model ("The Repo")
Data Access	PDF buried in a sub-menu	Searchable, version-controlled single source of truth
Public Input	3-minute limit at midnight	Continuous, threaded, and searchable

Decision Logic	"Trust us, we looked into it"	Public commit history showing why options were accepted or rejected
Volunteer Coordination	Spreadsheets and "I'll call you"	Distributed task-tracking with commitment visibility

How It Works

- A community suggestion (like the PTA Bridge Grant) is submitted as a **proposal**
- The board's concerns (legal, financial, logistical) are documented as **review comments**
- Instead of dozens of residents repeating the same message, they **endorse** the existing proposal digitally
- By the time the meeting starts, the board knows exactly where consensus lies

The Result

The board meeting becomes an opportunity to:

- Reach people who don't follow the public process
- Coordinate directly with community working groups
- Celebrate students and educators
- Go home before midnight knowing something was actually solved

The "De-Risk Your Job" Pitch

When the board keeps the process private, they own 100% of the failure. When they move it into a publicly-auditable process:

- The community becomes **co-engineers**, not critics
- Red tape gets vetted in real-time by residents with relevant expertise
- The board gains documented proof that they considered community input

The Immediate Ask

We are not asking the board to build or adopt a platform. We are asking for:

1. A **"Transparency Pilot"** for one module - start with the photography vendor contract (Module 2). Make the contract, commission rates, and data-sharing terms public.
2. A **Designated Liaison** from the board to engage with the community working group between meetings.
3. A **Resolution** sanctioning a working group that operates on open-governance principles.

The community is already building the coordination infrastructure. We just need the board to interface with it.

Legislative Tailwind

NJ's Open Public Meetings Act (N.J.S.A. 10:4-6 et seq.)^[21] already requires 48-hour advance notice of meetings, and the Legislature has repeatedly introduced bills to strengthen agenda-posting requirements. The trend is clearly toward more transparency, not less. This proposal lets the board get ahead of the curve rather than be dragged into compliance.

Governance-as-code precedents: The Washington DC Council published its legal code on GitHub^[22] as version-controlled, machine-readable documents. The Open Law Library^[23] helps municipalities do the same. Enspiral^[24], a New Zealand cooperative network, maintains its governance agreements as version-controlled documents with full change history (and has a newer handbook^[25]).

These are real, operational examples of the model we're proposing.

Module 15: Community Sports & Athletics Partnerships

Volunteer Leagues, Junior Coaches, and the Multi-Organization Model

The Problem

School athletics are often among the first programs cut or fee-gated during budget crises. Across NJ, districts facing deficits have responded with:

- **Pay-to-play fees** ranging from under \$100 to over \$1,000 per sport per student
- Elimination of JV and middle school programs
- Consolidation of teams across schools
- Complete elimination of "non-mandated" athletic programs

These cuts disproportionately affect lower-income families and undermine the physical, social, and developmental benefits that school sports provide.

The Opportunity: Community Leagues as Partners

The district is not the only organization running youth athletics. Community sports leagues already operate extensive athletic programs:

Organization Type	Examples	What They Bring
Recreation leagues	Little League, AYSO, Pop Warner, local rec leagues	Fields, equipment, volunteer coaches, insurance, registration systems
Travel/competitive clubs	Club soccer, AAU basketball, travel baseball	Higher-level coaching, tournament infrastructure, fundraising experience
Community organizations	PAL (Police Athletic League), CYO, YMCA	Facilities, trained staff, community service frameworks, established volunteer pipelines
Specialty programs	Martial arts studios, dance schools, swim clubs	Certified instructors, specialized facilities, enrichment models

These organizations already solve the problems the district struggles with: coaching recruitment, equipment procurement, scheduling, insurance, and parent coordination. They do it with volunteer labor and parent fees rather than tax dollars.

Partnership Models

Model 1: Shared-Use Agreements

The district shares facilities (fields, gyms, pools) with community leagues in exchange for the league absorbing some of the athletic programming the district can no longer fund.

How it works:

- The district leases field/gym time to the league at nominal cost (\$1/year or reduced maintenance contribution)
- The league runs programming during after-school or weekend hours
- Students participate through the league rather than through a school team
- The district saves coaching stipends, equipment costs, and insurance premiums

NJ precedent: The NJ DCA shared services framework^[26] covers facility-sharing between public entities and community organizations. Shared services agreements reported to DCA since 2011 have resulted in cumulative savings exceeding \$28 million.

Model 2: League-Operated School Athletics

The community league takes over the operational side of school athletics entirely:

- The league provides coaches (volunteer parents, trained per league standards)
- The district provides facilities and covers transportation for away games
- Students still wear school colors and compete under the school name
- The league handles registration, equipment, scheduling, and insurance

This is essentially how many elementary school sports already work - parent volunteers coach, the school provides the gym. The model just extends to middle and high school levels for non-varsity programs.

Model 3: Pay-to-Play with Community Subsidies

If the district implements pay-to-play fees:

- Community organizations and PTAs create **scholarship funds** to cover fees for families who can't afford them
- Organizations like All Kids Play^[27] provide grants for youth sports in low-income areas
- The PTA's OpenCollective can include an "Athletics Access Fund" where community members contribute to ensure no student is excluded

Equity guardrail: Pay-to-play without robust fee waivers and scholarship programs creates a two-tier system. Any fee structure must include full waivers for families receiving free/reduced lunch, and the waiver process must be private and non-stigmatizing.

Junior Coaches: High School Students in Youth Athletics

The Concept

High school athletes return as assistant coaches and referees in youth leagues. This is one of the most natural mentoring relationships in a community - a teenager coaching the same sport they grew up playing, at the same school they attended a few years ago, for kids who look up to them.

- **For the high schooler:** community service hours, leadership experience, coaching certification, and college application material - all while giving back to the community that raised them

- **For the younger kids:** role models who are close enough in age to be relatable, but experienced enough to teach
- **For the community:** a visible cycle of kids helping kids that strengthens connections across age groups

How It Works in Practice

Several models already exist:

- **USYVL (United States Youth Volleyball League)**^[28] actively recruits teen assistant coaches. No experience needed; coaching clinics provided. Weekly commitment of 3-4 hours. Explicitly positioned as a way to fulfill high school community service requirements.
- **PAL (Police Athletic League)** chapters across NJ use high school volunteers as assistant coaches and referees. NJ PAL^[29] has established frameworks for teen involvement.
- **YMCA programs** recruit teen volunteers for youth sports coaching and mentoring across NJ locations.
- **CYO leagues** commonly have high school players return as assistant coaches for younger divisions.

Teen Volunteer and Service-Learning Programs

Many NJ municipalities and organizations already run structured teen volunteer programs - sometimes branded as "Volunteers" or similar - where high schoolers assist with recreation programs, summer camps, and community events in exchange for documented service hours. Examples:

- Municipal recreation departments across NJ recruit teens 13-17 as program assistants for youth activities
- NJ High School Volunteers^[30] connects students with service opportunities statewide
- Many NJ high schools offer elective credit for community service (typically 70 hours per half-credit), though this is district-by-district policy, not a state mandate

Certification and Safety

For student volunteers in coaching roles:

- **SafeSport**^[31] training is required by most national governing bodies (US Soccer, USA Basketball, etc.) for anyone in a coaching role. The training is free. For minors, policies vary; some organizations require the parent to complete it or the supervising adult coach to hold certification.
- **NJ Background Checks (N.J.S.A. 18A:6-7.1):** NJ law requires criminal background checks for school volunteers with regular student contact. For volunteers under 18, background checks are generally not applicable, but adult oversight is mandatory.
- **League liability insurance** typically covers registered volunteers including minors. AYSO, for example, explicitly includes teen referees and assistant coaches under their coverage.

School Credit Integration

A formal "Junior Coach" program could be structured as:

1. **Independent Study / Elective Credit** - the student works with a faculty advisor, logs coaching hours, writes reflections, and earns elective credit

2. **Community Service Hours** - logged and verified through the league, counting toward graduation requirements, NHS, and college applications
3. **CTE Pathway** - under NJ Career and Technical Education frameworks, a coaching/recreation pathway could formalize the experience

The guidance office at each high school would need to pre-approve the activity to ensure it meets their specific criteria.

The Multi-Organization Model

This is where the whitepaper's vision expands beyond the PTA. The school district doesn't need one partner organization - it needs an ecosystem:

Organization	Contributes
PTA	Fundraising, enrichment, photography, grant writing
Sports leagues	Athletics, coaching, equipment, insurance
Student volunteers	Peer tutoring, junior coaching, tech support, media
Local businesses	Enrichment instruction, sponsorship, equipment
Community groups	Grounds maintenance, neighborhood coordination

Each organization contributes what it's best positioned for. High school students bridge multiple organizations as junior coaches, tech volunteers, and peer mentors. What's needed is a **coordination layer** - transparent scheduling, commitment tracking, and communication - that connects all of these to district needs.

What We Need from the Board

1. **Willingness to explore shared-use agreements** for facilities
2. **Data on current athletic program costs** - coaching stipends, equipment, insurance, transportation - so community organizations can scope what they'd absorb
3. **A liaison** to coordinate with league leadership on transition planning
4. **Pay-to-play fee waiver policies** that are robust, private, and easy to access

References

- West Orange \$15M budget crisis (The Digest Online)^[1]
- NJ DCA Shared Services^[26]
- All Kids Play youth sports grants^[27]
- USYVL volunteer coaching^[28]
- NJ PAL^[29]
- NJ High School Volunteers^[30]

- SafeSport training^[31]
- Rep. Gottheimer bipartisan legislation for youth sports affordability^[32]

References

URLs referenced throughout this document.

- [1] <https://thedigestonline.com/news/west-orange-schools-budget-deficit-2026-layoffs/>
- [2] <https://www.nj.com/news/2026/04/this-nj-district-wants-to-cut-70-teachers-and-staff-and...>
- [3] <https://patch.com/new-jersey/westorange/west-orange-schools-face-14m-budget-gap-70-jobs...>
- [4] <https://patch.com/new-jersey/westorange/budget-meltdowns-slam-schools-across-essex-coun...>
- [5] <https://newjerseymonitor.com/2026/02/20/nj-school-budget-deficits/>
- [6] <https://woparents.org/>
- [7] <https://papie.org/about/f-a-q/>
- [8] <https://patch.com/new-jersey/westorange/west-orange-bans-gas-powered-leaf-blowers-again>
- [9] <https://www.njea.org/new-jersey-school-employee-health-plan-offers-equivalent-benefits-...>
- [10] <https://jerseyvindicator.org/2026/01/28/new-jersey-school-district-missed-49-million-in...>
- [11] <https://thefrisc.com/sfusd-budget-pain-prompts-talk-of-ptas-sharing-funds-across-school...>
- [12] <https://nj1015.com/new-jersey-leaf-blower-ban/>
- [13] <https://jerseyvindicator.org/2026/02/11/perth-amboy-workers-whistleblower-suit-alleges-...>
- [14] <https://www.nj.gov/comptroller/news/2025/20250909.shtml>
- [15] https://www.nj.gov/comptroller/library/reports/HIF/2025-09-09_hif.pdf
- [16] <https://www.njea.org/ch-44-faqs-and-downloads/>
- [17] <https://www.horizonblue.com/shbp/plans/medical-plans/local-education-employee-plans/nj-...>
- [18] <https://www.njsba.org/services/njsba-cooperative-pricing-system/>
- [19] <https://hrexecutive.com/behind-the-benefits-game-changer-for-this-24k-employee-school-d...>
- [20] <https://www.nj.gov/treasury/pensions/hb-active-sehbp.shtml>
- [21] <https://www.nj.gov/grc/public-information/open-public-meetings/>
- [22] <https://github.com/DCCouncil/law-xml>
- [23] <https://openlawlib.org/>
- [24] <https://github.com/enspiral/agreements>
- [25] <https://handbook.enspiral.com/index.html>
- [26] <https://www.nj.gov/dca/dlgs/sharedservices.shtml>
- [27] <https://allkidsplay.org/youth-sports-grants/>
- [28] <https://usyvl.org/volunteer/>
- [29] <https://njpal.com>
- [30] <https://njhsvolunteers.com/>

[31] <https://safesport.org>

[32] <https://gottheimer.house.gov/posts/release-gottheimer-announces-bipartisan-legislation-...>