

Building Brandywine's Future: A Roadmap for Results

**Because you understand. Vote Karen Hartley-Nagle.
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Preface: Why I Wrote This Plan

I didn't write this plan to make headlines. I wrote it to make change.

A few months ago, I stepped into this race believing I was running for a seat on a school board. What I quickly discovered is that I was stepping into something much bigger: a crossroads.

For years, Brandywine School District was a source of pride—stable, well-regarded, even envied. Families moved here because of it. Property values rose because of it. Generations of students graduated with real opportunity in front of them because of it.

But slowly, quietly, and steadily... something shifted.

Enrollment declined. Achievement gaps widened. Charter schools grew. Families began leaving—not just for different schools, but for different counties, even different states. Not because they stopped believing in public education, but because they stopped believing it was working here. The trust broke, and no one wanted to say it out loud.

Until now.

What we've done in recent years hasn't been enough. Good intentions haven't been enough. The status quo—just surviving from year to year—definitely isn't enough.

I've spoken to parents who feel left out of decisions that shape their children's lives. Teachers who are overwhelmed and under-supported. Seniors who wonder if their taxes are making any real difference. And students—curious, creative, capable—who are waiting for a system to catch up to their potential.

Right now, we are a district adrift. But it doesn't have to stay that way.

This plan lays out where we are—and more importantly, where we could be in five years if we act now. If we restore transparency. If we demand accountability. If we treat the Brandywine School Board not as a ceremonial body, but as the engine that drives real progress.

Imagine what that could look like:

- A district that becomes a model for the state—and the nation—in financial responsibility, academic excellence, and family engagement.
- Students discovering not only what they're good at, but what's possible—college, the trades, entrepreneurship, or paths we haven't even imagined yet.
- Teachers who are supported, respected, and empowered to innovate.
- Families who return—because they *believe* in the Brandywine School District again.
- Seniors who see their tax dollars at work and know they're helping to build something lasting.

This isn't a fantasy. It's a roadmap. But only if we take it.

And let me be clear: these are not all the answers. This plan was written in just three days—because I knew something had to be said, and someone had to start saying it. I knew more needed to be done, and that information needed to get out. If no one talks about the problems or acts now, this generation loses—because change won’t happen unless we make it happen.

I wrote this because I saw what no one else seemed willing to lay bare. I poured through budgets, data, comparisons with other districts in Delaware, Pennsylvania, and beyond. What I found was sobering—but also energizing. Because the solutions *do* exist. We just need the courage to confront the truth and the will to act.

To be clear: this report will not make everyone comfortable. It’s not supposed to. We’re not going to fix this by looking away or sugarcoating the truth. We’re going to fix it by facing it—together.

They told me this race was too small. Only 1.3% – 5% usually vote. That school board seats don’t matter. That no one pays attention. That people won’t get involved. But they’re wrong—this is where the future begins.

This is the front line. This is where decisions are made that affect real kids, real classrooms, real futures. Right now. This moment.

So here’s what I ask of you:

Before you cast your vote, look at the candidates. Really look. Do their actions match their words? Will they return your call? Will they listen—*really* listen? Will they show up when it’s hard, not just when it’s convenient?

Because this isn’t just about who gets elected. It’s about what kind of district we want to become—and what kind of future we’re willing to fight for.

I didn’t step up to keep the peace. I stepped up to make a difference.

This is our chance. Let’s not miss it.

Chapter 1.

Brandywine Roadmap: Strategic Plan Summary

Brandywine School District (Brandywine School District) doesn’t have a resource problem. It has a results problem. With a 2025 operating budget of \$257.7 million and per-student spending topping \$24,901—nearly \$7,000 more than the state average—Brandywine School District is one of the best-funded districts in Delaware. But you wouldn’t know it by the results. Only 24% of Brandywine School District high schoolers are proficient in math. Less than half are reading at grade level. These aren’t just numbers. They’re a wake-up call.

This roadmap is not another promise. It's a plan—clear, specific, and grounded in reality. A blueprint for a district that can do better because it must do better. We've compared Brandywine to top-performing districts in Delaware, Pennsylvania, and across the country. And here's what we've learned: The difference isn't in how much you spend—it's in how well you lead.

This plan doesn't tinker around the edges. It targets root causes and breaks through the excuses. It's bold in scope, specific in strategy, and built for accountability.

Key priorities include:

- Closing achievement gaps with early literacy and math recovery initiatives
- Launching a future-ready STEAM curriculum with AI integration
- Attracting and retaining top educators with better support and stronger pipelines
- Rebuilding trust through transparency, access, and accountability
- Securing new federal, state, and private dollars to ease local tax pressure
- Restoring safety and pride in every school building

This roadmap gives Brandywine a five-year track to regain its footing, improve its outcomes, and deliver the kind of public education families deserve—and taxpayers expect.

Brandywine School District has the resources. It has the people. What it needs now is direction. This is that direction. This is that plan.

Chapter 2.

Seeing What Others Miss – The Vision That Guides My Service

I used to think everyone could see what I saw.

I thought it was normal to walk into a meeting and immediately recognize the ripple effects of a single decision. Or to scan a budget and not just see the numbers, but the story they tell—the pressure points, the missed opportunities, the consequences quietly unfolding. I thought everyone sensed when something didn't add up and could visualize the chain reaction it would set off.

But over time, I've learned:

What feels like common sense to me is actually uncommon insight.

I first realized it while running for Congress in 2007–2008. I went door to door and business to business across Delaware, asking questions, listening hard. What I heard—and what I saw—deeply concerned me. Employers were shutting down. Jobs were moving overseas. Investments were vanishing. I spoke publicly at Democratic committee meetings about the trend I was watching unfold in real time. I warned of what was coming. Months later, the financial crisis hit—and everything I had been tracking came to pass.

That was just the beginning.

When I ran for New Castle County Council President in 2014 and took office in 2016, the ability to spot patterns and pressure points became essential. I noticed flaws in land use proposals—like one asking the Council to rezone 87 parcels in a single vote. It wasn't transparent, and it wasn't safe governance. I spoke out. Civic groups began raising concerns. The administration backed down. Not perfect, but better. Because I knew: the more you bundle, the easier it is to bury the bad stuff. And I was watching.

There was the budget maneuver involving DBOT—where \$3 million owed to the county was proposed to be swapped for volatile penny stocks. I read the contract out loud, line by line, at a Council meeting. I researched the company's finances and warned of the risk. Executive Meyer listened. The deal was killed. Months later, the stock crashed. That wasn't luck. That was vigilance.

Then the Hope Center. In December 2020, the County entered into a management agreement with Hersha Hospitality to run the shelter for the unhoused. I flagged serious problems in the contract and raised public concerns. Years later, the County itself filed a lawsuit citing many of the exact issues I had warned about—mold, mismanagement, and missing funds.

As I ran for County Executive, I spoke about the fiscal cliff coming after 2025. A reality we still aren't fully prepared for. And now, as a candidate for Brandywine School Board, I see the same warning signs—financial imbalance, overburdened staff, lack of transparency, enrollment decline, lawsuits that could have been prevented, and a failure to fight for every dollar of available state and federal funding.

Sometimes, I don't see everything at first.

I don't talk about it. As Council President, I was always moving—solving one problem, then jumping to the next. I didn't stop to reflect. I just kept going. It wasn't until someone thanked me months later, or asked about a vote they didn't realize I had made, that I understood the full impact. What I saw. What I acted on. What quietly made a difference.

Then there are moments when I uncover one overlooked line item, one key sentence in a contract—and suddenly, everything shifts. The picture sharpens. The ripple changes. I adjust—strategically, quickly, always with the public in mind.

There are wild cards too. Crises that hit out of nowhere. But even then, I don't panic. I simulate what happens next. I map it in my head. I change course when I need to—because I've learned how to lead when the unexpected becomes inevitable.

People sometimes ask why I speak up when it would be easier not to.

Why I read every contract.

Why I dig through records late at night.

Why I never vote until I understand every piece of the puzzle.

The answer is simple:

I see patterns. I can't not see them.

Sometimes I see too much. Sometimes it's lonely. Because by the time most people recognize the problem, I've been tracking it for months—or years.

But this is what I bring to public service:

- The ability to see what others don't.
- The courage to say what others won't.
- The commitment to act before it's too late.
- And the humility to adjust when new truths emerge.

This isn't about instincts.

It's about a different kind of leadership—one grounded in vigilance, action, and service.

Not waiting for headlines.

Not looking for credit.

Just doing the work, and doing it right.

It's not always easy. But it's necessary.

And I believe Brandywine deserves nothing less.

Chapter 3.

Current State of Brandywine School District

Brandywine School District spans 35 square miles of promise—and problems. Nestled in the northeast corner of Delaware, it stretches from the rolling affluence of Greenville and Hockessin, down to the historic city of Wilmington—the largest in the state—out to the Brandywine riverfront communities of Claymont and Edgemoor. It includes Talleyville, Arden, Ardencroft, Ardentown, Bellefonte, Carrcroft, Penny Hill, Brandywine Hundred, and portions of northeast Wilmington.

Brandywine School District serves a diverse mix of urban, suburban, and semi-rural communities. This geography, with its proximity to major urban and suburban corridors, brings together neighborhoods with vastly different economic profiles, educational expectations, and infrastructure needs. These contrasts shape everything from student performance to parental engagement and access to opportunity—that kind of diversity demands agility and precision from a school system. It demands leadership that sees the full picture and serves every student.

As of the 2024–2025 school year, Brandywine School District comprised 16 schools: three high schools (grades 9–12), three middle schools (grades 5–8), nine elementary schools (grades K–5), and two preschool programs (PreK). The district enrolled 10,349 students—down one student from the previous year—and employed 919 teachers and 622 additional staff. That results in a student-to-teacher ratio of 11.27:1, better than both state and national averages. In 2022–2023, the district reported 778.10 full-time classroom teachers (FTE) and 1,279.10 total staff (FTE).

Brandywine School District's student body reflects the racial and socioeconomic diversity of its communities. As of 2022–2023, students were 39.6% White, 36.3% Black or African American, 15.4% Hispanic or Latino, 4.1% Asian, 0.6% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 4.0% identifying as two or more races—meaning students of color comprise 60.4% of the district. Additionally, 10.6% of students ages 5–17 live below the poverty line. These numbers don't just reflect who Brandywine School District serves—they reinforce the district's obligation to design an equitable, inclusive, and high-performing public education system.

Yet for all its resources, Brandywine School District is falling behind. In 2025, the district operated on a \$257.7 million budget—spending \$24,901 per student. That's nearly \$7,000 more than Delaware's state average and over \$7,500 more than the national average. But despite this investment, Brandywine School District ranks near the bottom among Delaware districts.

Just 24% of high school students are proficient in math. Only 40% meet grade-level standards in reading. Meanwhile, Radnor Township, PA—just 30 minutes away—spends \$21,000 per student and sees over 70% of students proficient in both subjects. The difference isn't money. It's leadership.

Recent headlines have further eroded public confidence. A Delaware Online/The News Journal investigation published on March 5, 2025, revealed that six teachers in Brandywine School District were actively teaching without proper licensure on that date. Two appeared to lack any valid license, and four had expired credentials—including one as far back as August 2022. The discovery exposed gaps in oversight and prompted renewed calls for accountability.

This followed a deeply disturbing, widely reported case involving emotional support therapist John Ervin Arnold, who was employed by Brandywine School District from October 2021 despite fabricating his master's and doctoral degrees. Concerns about Arnold's credentials were first flagged in May 2024 by a Nemours Children's Hospital psychologist, yet he continued working until his arrest in July 2024 for the rape of a 5-year-old family member. Brandywine School District did not publicly disclose his employment status or the timeline of his termination or take swift corrective action, fueling criticism about the district's transparency and background check processes. Four administrators were placed on leave; disciplinary actions included the dismissal of one senior official and pay reductions for others. The Delaware Department of Education was also faulted for validating Arnold's fraudulent credentials.

As the district faces growing scrutiny, it's also confronting mounting financial pressures. COVID-relief funding (ESSER) expires in 2025, cutting off a temporary lifeline that helped cover staffing, HVAC repairs, and tech improvements. Meanwhile, Brandywine School District's legal expenses—tied to special education lawsuits, employment claims, and open records cases—are on the rise. And pending legislation (House Bill 42) could soon eliminate the district's ability to raise up to 10% in additional tax revenue without a referendum following property reassessment.

What's become undeniable is this: Brandywine's failure to promptly disclose serious lapses—or to offer a clear and transparent path forward—has only deepened public mistrust. Families haven't lost faith in public education—they've lost faith in how it's being managed. When a

district spends more per student than nearly every peer and still ranks near the bottom in outcomes, trust evaporates. When licensing failures and horrific personnel scandals are met with silence instead of swift accountability, confidence collapses.

And yet—Brandywine is not beyond repair. It's not broken beyond belief. The foundation is still here: dedicated teachers, determined students, and families who want to stay—not flee. They haven't walked away. They're waiting—for leadership, for honesty, for hope.

The community isn't asking for perfection. They're asking for truth. They're asking for action. They're asking for a plan.

This roadmap is that plan.

Chapter 4:

What Makes a Great School—and How Brandywine Compares

Where Families Start and Futures Are Built

There are many reasons families invest in a home in Delaware—affordable living, safe neighborhoods, proximity to major cities, and coastal charm. But for families with children—or even those who plan to someday—there's one factor that matters more than almost anything else: the quality of the local school district.

It's no secret. In a state like Delaware, with 38 school districts serving just under 140,000 public school students, education is one of the most powerful magnets drawing families into communities and anchoring them there for generations. And for good reason: many of our school districts are national award winners, and very few fall below national averages in overall academic performance.

But in today's world, families are looking for more than test scores. They want schools where students thrive, not just academically—but emotionally, socially, and as part of a community that lifts all learners.

In this chapter, we'll define what makes a great school. We'll look at how Delaware's top-performing districts are excelling—and then we'll examine how the Brandywine School District compares, where we're strong, where we must improve, and why the future can still be ours if we're willing to act boldly and smartly—now.

The Real Criteria for Delaware's Best School

A survey of Delaware's highest-performing school districts—Appoquinimink, Delmar, and Cape Henlopen—revealed six clear, consistent traits of excellence:

1. **Students enjoy being at school.**
2. **High expectations are placed on everyone—students, staff, and administrators alike.**
3. **Teachers are dedicated, not just to content, but to community.**
4. **Discipline is effective, but never oppressive.**
5. **Teaching is individualized, not standardized.**
6. **Leadership is visionary, trusted, and respected.**

In other words: Great schools feel like great places—for everyone in them.

Where Brandywine Stands

Brandywine School District is rich in history and community pride. With a location in northern New Castle County—bordering Wilmington and the Pennsylvania state line—Brandywine’s geographic advantage is unmatched. Yet when it comes to the criteria families use to choose where to live, especially families new to Delaware, we are not yet viewed in the same league as Appoquinimink or Cape Henlopen.

Here’s how we compare:

Metric	Appoquinimink SD	Cape Henlopen SD	Delmar SD	Brandywine SD
Avg. Expenditure per Student	\$14,687	\$14,378	\$13,926	\$24,005
AP Course Participation Rate (High School)	40%+	23%	31%	14%
Student Satisfaction (Self-Reported)	High	High	Moderate/High	Inconsistent
Minority Enrollment	36%	29%	23%	63%
Teacher Retention	High	High	Moderate	Low (46% turnover in 5 years)
Blue Ribbon Schools	2	1	0	0 (as of 2025)

Brandywine spends *more* per student than any of the top three districts, yet achieves *less consistent results*. Our advanced placement participation is less than half that of our peers. We serve a more diverse population—something to be proud of—but we must recognize that equity demands excellence. And right now, our families are leaving—**over 3,000 students have departed the district in the past 10 years**, many to charter schools or neighboring districts with stronger reputations.

What Works—and What Brandywine Can Learn

Appoquinimink School District is fast-growing because it treats students like assets and parents like partners. Its schools are community hubs with wraparound supports. Their AP participation rate exceeds 40%. Their leadership team has been nationally recognized.

Cape Henlopen leverages small class sizes, rich elective offerings, and cultural programming to engage students. They've built trust by consistently investing in quality-of-life factors like school safety, extracurriculars, and even mental health services.

Delmar is small but mighty. Its student guidance program is widely praised for giving each student a customized roadmap for success. That level of personalization pays off.

And here's the hard truth: Brandywine once led the way in Delaware. But now, we are seen as a district in retreat—too slow to respond, too insular to innovate, and too divided to deliver.

The Cost of Inaction

When families leave, they take more than their children. They take energy, engagement, and resources.

Each departing student means roughly **\$15,000** less in state and local education funding per year. That's **\$45 million lost over the last decade**.

Worse, it creates a negative feedback loop. Fewer students → Less funding → Larger class sizes → Teacher burnout → Lower performance → More departures.

We cannot cut our way to excellence. But we also don't need to raise taxes to turn this around. We need to do what successful districts do: invest strategically, plan ambitiously, and lead courageously.

The Cost of Action: An Investment That Pays Dividends

The good news? We don't need to reinvent the wheel. We can learn from the best.

- **Create a Brandywine Academic Renaissance Plan** modeled on Appoquinimink's community-centered innovation labs.
- **Invest in AP & Dual Enrollment access** to rival Cape Henlopen.
- **Launch a Student Success Portal**—a data-driven feedback and guidance system like Delmar's.
- **Build a "Teacher Anchor Plan"** to retain educators with targeted supports, professional pathways, and classroom freedom.
- **Establish a Districtwide Student Voice Council** to engage youth in co-designing change.

What the Next Five Years Could Look Like

Imagine this:
It's 2030. Brandywine is back.

Families are moving *into* the district. Teacher vacancies are rare. Students brag about their schools. Guidance counselors can tell each student their plan to college, a career, or both. Graduation rates are up. Violence is down. Parents are engaged—not enraged. And our students—especially our most vulnerable—are thriving.

It's not a fantasy. It's what happens when we stop making excuses, stop fighting yesterday's battles, and start fighting for tomorrow's possibilities.

Conclusion: What Makes a Great School?

A great school is not just a place of learning. It's a place of belonging. A place where children are safe to grow, parents are eager to engage, and teachers are proud to serve. The best school districts don't just educate—they elevate.

Brandywine has everything we need: a passionate community, diverse and resilient students, committed educators, and the financial resources to make it happen.

What we need now—is the will.
The courage to lead.
And a plan built to deliver.

Let's build that future. Together.

Chapter 5.

Financial Overview: Spending vs. Outcomes

You can't fix what you won't face. That's where Brandywine School District finds itself today: high spending, low performance, and a trust deficit with the public that grows with each missed opportunity. The numbers aren't just numbers—they're a signal. Brandywine School District's 2025 budget stands at \$257.7 million. That's \$24,901 per student—nearly \$7,000 more than Delaware's average and almost \$8,000 above the national figure. And yet, fewer than 1 in 4 high schoolers can meet state math standards.

Let's be clear: Brandywine School District isn't failing because of a lack of funding. It's failing because that funding isn't working hard enough for students.

Roughly 78% of Brandywine School District's budget goes to employee compensation—teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, support staff. That mirrors national trends, but the outcomes tell a different story. In Radnor Township, Pennsylvania, \$21,000 per student buys a district with over 70% of students proficient in both math and English. Indian River, right here in Delaware, spends \$18,400 per pupil and still performs better in multiple academic categories.

So where does Brandywine School District's money go?

- **Administrative Overhead:** Central office expansion has outpaced classroom investment.
- **Legal Fees:** Costs tied to labor disputes, transparency litigation, and special education claims have ballooned.
- **Expired Federal Relief:** COVID-era funds papered over cracks. With ESSER dollars ending in 2025, those cracks are now widening into gaps.
- **Unmonitored Programs:** Too many programs continue without measurable results or review.

This is where strategy matters more than slogans:

- **Where we are:** Overextended, underperforming, and facing a fiscal cliff.
- **Where we should be:** Leaner, student-focused, and more transparent.
- **How we get there:**
 - Audit every dollar. Eliminate inefficiencies.
 - Tie investments directly to academic returns.
 - Shift from compliance to performance-based budgeting.
 - Reduce administrative growth and reinvest in instruction.

Recommendations:

1. Commission a third-party audit to map current spending against outcomes.
2. Require outcome justification for program renewal or expansion.
3. Launch a public-facing financial dashboard tied to student achievement metrics.
4. Consolidate redundant roles and redirect funds to STEM, literacy, and college/career readiness.
5. Establish a dedicated Grants & Funding Office.

That last one isn't just good policy—it's good math. A skilled full-time grant writer might cost \$75,000. But districts like Appoquinimink have secured over \$1.4 million in external funds within two years by hiring grant professionals. Brandywine School District could potentially recapture between \$500,000 and \$2 million annually through federal, state, and philanthropic sources. In a district facing hard fiscal decisions, that's not just helpful. It's essential.

This chapter isn't about spending less. It's about spending smarter. Because our kids deserve more than an expensive system that doesn't deliver. They deserve results. And so do the taxpayers footing the bill.

Chapter 6.

The Real Cost—and Value—of a Brandywine Education

Let's talk about the numbers—because they matter.

According to Brandywine School District's approved FY2025 budget, our total general operating expenses come in at roughly **\$257.7 million**. With a projected enrollment of **10,349 students**, that breaks down to **\$24,901 per student per year**. Let me say that again: we're investing nearly **\$25,000 per student, every year**—a figure significantly higher than both the **Delaware state average** and the **national average**.

On paper, this should be a point of pride. That number includes everything from classroom instruction to transportation, building maintenance, special education, school nurses, counselors, support services, and administrative functions. In theory, this reflects our full commitment to delivering a high-quality public education. It's a serious investment—one that any parent, taxpayer, or policymaker should expect to see paying off in stronger student outcomes.

But that's where the problem begins.

Despite spending more per student than nearly every other district in the state, Brandywine isn't leading the pack—we're losing ground. Our **Advanced Placement participation rates** are lagging. **Student departures** to charter schools and neighboring districts are climbing. And our overall performance data has been inconsistent. That gap between investment and impact? It's what keeps me up at night. Because when families make decisions about where to live—or whether to stay—they don't just look at the number. They ask: *What does my child actually get for \$24,901 a year?*

And we must be honest: right now, the answer isn't what it should be.

Now here's something else you need to know: that \$24,901 per-student figure, as comprehensive as it sounds, **doesn't tell the whole story**. There are major expenses it leaves out—some of which are crucial to understanding our financial reality.

It **doesn't include the cost of new school buildings or renovations**—those are funded separately through capital improvement referenda and state bond issues. So when a roof leaks, or HVAC fails, or we need to build a new school? That's **outside the \$257 million** operating budget.

It also **doesn't cover the debt service**—the money we owe on past capital investments. Like a mortgage, these are real costs that impact our bottom line, but they don't show up in the per-student price tag.

Then there are **restricted-use grants**—federal and state dollars earmarked for very specific programs, like Title I for low-income students or IDEA for special education. These funds help enormously, but they're separate pots of money that can't be used flexibly to address broader district needs.

Food services? That's its own budget too—often operating more like a business unit, dependent on subsidies and student meal payments. Unless we're explicitly supplementing it from the general fund, those dollars don't show up in the per-student figure either.

And here's something most people never hear about: **charter school pass-through payments**. When a student living in our district chooses to attend a charter school, we're legally obligated to transfer a portion of the funding to that school. Those funds leave our district, but they still impact our budget—and they're not reflected in our cost-per-student data.

Finally, **long-term liabilities like pensions and retiree healthcare (OPEB)** are mostly managed at the state level. We contribute to the system, but the full cost—the long-term obligation—doesn't get baked into our operating costs per student.

So what does all of this mean?

It means that while we're spending more than almost any other district in Delaware, we're still **facing real financial constraints**. And it means we must be laser-focused on making sure every dollar works harder—because with numbers like these, we don't have a funding problem. We have a **spending problem**, a **strategy problem**, and a **transparency problem**.

As a school board member, I will demand that our budget aligns with outcomes—not bureaucracy. That we measure return on investment—not just dollars spent. And that every family in this district sees real value, real results, and a real plan when they ask the only question that matters: *Is my child getting the education they deserve?*

Because at \$24,901 per student, they should be.

Chapter 7.

Smart Spending: No Tax Increases, Just Better Strategy

In Brandywine, we don't need to raise taxes—we need to raise expectations. This chapter lays out how we get better results from the dollars we already have. Because it's not about spending more. It's about spending smarter.

Right now, Brandywine School District is spending at the top tier—\$24,901 per student—but getting bottom-tier outcomes. That's not sustainable, and it's not acceptable. The good news? We have room to pivot, and a path to do it.

Here's the strategy:

1. Refocus dollars on classrooms, not bureaucracy. Brandywine School District has expanded central administration while student achievement has stagnated. For example, administrative

spending has grown by nearly 18% over the past five years, while classroom materials budgets have remained flat. A central office audit would cost approximately \$50,000 and could identify potential annual savings between \$250,000 and \$500,000.

2. Launch performance-based budgeting. Every program should prove it works—or it doesn’t get renewed. Brandywine School District can begin with pilot programs in literacy and math, tying allocations to improved state test scores, attendance, and intervention success. Red Clay Consolidated School District implemented a similar model and saw reading proficiency increase by 8% in three years.

3. Maximize existing resources before considering new revenue. Districts like Indian River and Appoquinimink have streamlined custodial contracts, consolidated software licenses, and bulk-purchased supplies across schools. Brandywine School District could generate \$300,000–\$600,000 in annual savings by adopting similar practices, confirmed by internal procurement benchmarks.

4. Tap untapped funds. Brandywine School District must become more competitive for federal and private grants. A full-time grant writer or contracting with a firm (estimated at \$75,000 annually) could result in \$500,000–\$2 million per year in secured funds. Appoquinimink used this strategy to secure \$1.4 million in STEM and HVAC upgrades over two years.

5. Prioritize long-term savings. Investing in preventative maintenance saves millions over time. Replacing outdated HVAC units with energy-efficient systems at three Brandywine School District schools could cost \$4 million upfront, but deliver \$400,000 in combined annual energy savings—paying for itself within 10 years. Investing \$1.2 million in early literacy now could prevent over \$3 million in remediation and intervention costs in grades 6–12, based on national estimates from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Bottom line: Brandywine doesn’t need to ask taxpayers for more until we prove we can use what we have—wisely, strategically, and transparently. And when we do, trust follows.

We’re not going back to the taxpayers. We’re going forward with a better plan—grounded in data, driven by outcomes, and built for results.

Chapter 8.

Federal & State Funding: Grants & Legislative Advocacy

Brandywine doesn’t have a revenue problem—it has a missed opportunities problem. And that’s about to change.

Across the country, districts with fewer resources and smaller budgets are outpacing Brandywine School District—not because they tax more, but because they fight harder for every dollar on the

table. Whether it's tapping competitive federal grants, maximizing state programs, or advocating for smarter legislation, it's time Brandywine stepped up.

Here's the strategy:

1. Hire a full-time grant writer or contracting firm.

- **Cost:** \$75,000 per year
- **Return on investment:** \$500,000 to \$2 million annually
- **Case study:** Appoquinimink School District hired a dedicated grant professional and secured \$1.4 million over two years for STEM curriculum development and HVAC upgrades.
- **Implementation:** Brandywine School District would post a position or contract with a firm by the start of the fiscal year and assign goals aligned to federal cycles, such as Title I, Title IV, and Perkins funding.

2. Build a legislative strategy.

- **Cost:** \$50,000–\$80,000 annually for a professional advocacy firm
- **Return on investment:** Red Clay and Capital School Districts have reported 12%–15% annual increases in state education allocations and matching capital funds since contracting professional lobbyists.
- **Action items:** Brandywine School District should engage a firm before the General Assembly's next budget cycle and begin advocating for ECE expansion, AI/STEAM integration, and infrastructure co-funding.

3. Target underutilized programs:

- **Federal:**
 - Rural and Low-Income School Program (RLISP)
 - Perkins V (CTE)
 - Full-Service Community Schools
 - Education Innovation and Research (EIR)
- **State:**
 - Opportunity Funding for English Learners and low-income students
 - School Safety and Wellness grants
 - Energy Efficiency School Construction Program
- **Example:** Capital School District used RLISP and Opportunity Funding to increase bilingual teacher recruitment and expand afterschool programs, boosting student attendance and achievement.

4. Align curriculum to funding priorities. Brandywine School District's emphasis on artificial intelligence, climate tech, and early college readiness tracks with priorities from the U.S. Department of Education. Districts like Washington Unified (CA) secured over \$6 million in federal funds by aligning AI curriculum development with federal innovation grant guidelines.

5. Launch a Grant & Policy Innovation Office.

- **Staffing cost:** ~\$250,000 (grant writer, data analyst, compliance officer)
- **Projected return:** \$5–\$10 million over five years
- **Example:** Prince George’s County (MD) created an Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and External Funding and increased their total federal and private grant funding by 40% over three years.

The bottom line: Every dollar Brandywine School District wins through advocacy is one less dollar it needs to ask from local taxpayers. And every grant secured is a vote of confidence in Brandywine School District’s future.

This isn’t about asking for more. It’s about getting what our students deserve—because we finally showed up to compete for it.

Chapter 9.

Student Achievement: The Data and the Challenge

Let’s not sugarcoat it: Brandywine’s student outcomes are unacceptable—and the community knows it. Only 24% of high schoolers in Brandywine School District meet math proficiency standards. Just 40% are reading on grade level. In some schools, those numbers are even lower. This isn’t just a challenge—it’s a crisis. And yet, with a per-pupil spending of \$24,901—well above both the state and national averages—we have the tools. What we’ve lacked is urgency, transparency, and targeted strategy.

Here’s where we stand:

- **Math proficiency (2023–2024):** 24% (state average: 32%, national: 34%)
- **Reading proficiency (2023–2024):** 40% (state average: 42%, national: 46%)
- **Graduation rate:** 83% (Delaware average: 87%)
- **Chronic absenteeism:** 26% of students missed more than 15 days

The problem isn’t our kids. It’s the system they’re in.

Here’s the plan to change that:

1. Early Literacy First Every national model—from Mississippi’s literacy miracle to Delaware’s Laurel School District—proves the same thing: early intervention works. Laurel closed a 20-point reading gap by investing in classroom coaching and aligned curriculum. Brandywine School District can replicate that success by scaling science-of-reading-aligned instruction, high-dosage tutoring, and early screening protocols. Estimated cost: \$1.2 million annually—less than 0.5% of Brandywine School District’s operating budget.

2. Target Math Recovery High-impact tutoring has become the gold standard. Districts like Camden, NJ, saw 2x academic gains with just 90 minutes per week of small-group tutoring. Brandywine School District should hire 25 part-time math recovery specialists to work across grades 4–10, especially in underperforming schools. Estimated cost: \$750,000 annually.

3. Launch a Future-Ready Workforce Initiative McKinsey reports that 78% of global companies already use some form of AI—and most expect to double their adoption by 2030. If Brandywine School District doesn't start preparing students now, they'll be left behind in an economy already moving forward. Delaware-based institutions like Del-One Credit Union and DelDOT are integrating AI for customer service, logistics, and risk management—proof that even regional employers demand 21st-century skills. Brandywine School District must develop a vertically integrated STEAM-to-AI curriculum from K–12.

4. Incorporate Arts & Music as Cognitive Catalysts Studies by the Arts Education Partnership show students in high-quality music and art programs score up to 20% higher in math and reading. Brandywine School District must leverage its existing arts infrastructure and prioritize interdisciplinary creativity, which boosts problem-solving, empathy, and academic performance.

5. Measure What Matters The current dashboard of Brandywine School District results is opaque, outdated, and inaccessible. We need a parent-friendly, real-time tracker of performance by school, grade, and subgroup. Districts like Frisco ISD (TX) have set the gold standard in public accountability. Brandywine School District can—and must—do the same.

6. Strengthen Academic Culture Achievement doesn't happen by accident. It's built by leadership, expectations, and relationships. Brandywine School District must train principals in evidence-based leadership models like Delaware's DASL framework, implement monthly school-wide data cycles, and build teacher-led improvement teams in each building.

7. Incentivize Progress Offer achievement grants to schools showing the biggest gains, regardless of starting point. Recognize teachers and staff publicly and monetarily for outstanding results. Make student growth a community celebration, not just a number in a file.

Bottom line: Student achievement isn't a mystery—it's a matter of commitment, clarity, and consistent execution. Other districts have done it. So can Brandywine. But we must stop making excuses and start making changes. Because every year we wait, more students fall behind.

This is the generation that will live with AI, climate disruption, and global competition. The question is: will we prepare them—or will we explain later why we didn't?

Chapter 10.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Let's be blunt: no education reform succeeds without teachers. They are the beating heart of every school, the difference between inspiration and apathy, between a student who thrives and

one who falls behind. And yet across the country—and right here in Brandywine—we are losing them.

Brandywine School District is at a tipping point. With nearly one in five teachers approaching retirement age and the national teacher pipeline shrinking, we face a crisis of continuity and capacity. Retaining experienced educators while attracting new talent is no longer optional. It's survival.

The numbers don't lie. Delaware saw a 37% drop in enrollment in teacher preparation programs over the last decade. Nearly 1,400 educator vacancies were reported across the state in 2023 alone. In Brandywine, the district employed 919 teachers in the 2024–2025 school year—but that number doesn't tell us how many are planning to leave, or how many classrooms have cycled through multiple substitutes in a single semester. That kind of churn kills consistency. It kills trust. And ultimately, it kills achievement.

Why are teachers leaving? Ask them. The answers are painfully consistent: Lack of support. Overwhelming workloads. Eroding autonomy. And yes, compensation that hasn't kept pace with the demands of the job. Add to that a culture that too often blames teachers for systemic failures, and you get burnout at scale.

We have to change that.

First, Brandywine must become a district where teachers want to work and stay. That means building a culture of respect, collaboration, and growth. It means ensuring every educator has access to high-quality mentorship and ongoing professional development. It means prioritizing mental health and wellness—not just for students, but for staff.

Second, we must rethink compensation. Competitive pay matters, especially when neighboring states like Maryland and Pennsylvania are offering signing bonuses and higher base salaries. But beyond dollars, we need to offer incentives that matter: student loan forgiveness, housing stipends for early-career teachers, tuition support for advanced degrees, and bonuses for those working in high-needs schools.

Third, Brandywine should partner aggressively with local universities, HBCUs, and community colleges to create direct pipelines into the classroom. That includes paid residencies, internships, and pathways for paraprofessionals and career changers. One model worth emulating is the "Grow Your Own" program—used successfully in places like Chicago and Nashville—which recruits future teachers from the communities they will serve.

Fourth, we must listen. That means regular surveys, teacher-led task forces, and direct input into curriculum and policy decisions. Top-down mandates are demoralizing. Shared governance builds morale—and accountability.

The goal is simple: make Brandywine the best place in Delaware to teach. When you build a system that respects, rewards, and elevates educators, students rise with them. We can't keep

asking teachers to do more with less. We need to give them more—because we’re asking them to shape the future.

And if we want a future that works, we start by making sure the people in front of the classroom feel like they matter. Because they do. And in Brandywine, it’s time we start proving it.

These are not pie-in-the-sky ideas. These are proven strategies with real-world results. And they are entirely within Brandywine School District’s power to implement—starting this year.

Because when the bell rings, it’s not policy that meets our children at the door. It’s people. And if we want to give every child a fighting chance, we have to start by fighting for those who teach them.

It’s time to stop losing teachers to the districts next door—and start becoming the district everyone wants to come home to.

Chapter 11.

Supporting Teachers, Elevating Instruction

No school can outperform the quality of its instruction—and no instruction can rise above the conditions under which it’s delivered. That’s why this chapter is about more than professional development. It’s about elevating the role of the teacher and transforming how we support instruction in every classroom, every day.

Brandywine School District has talented, passionate educators. But talent alone isn’t enough when teachers are overwhelmed, under-supported, and left to navigate constantly shifting expectations without a clear roadmap. Instructional support must be direct, sustained, and strategic.

We’ve talked about raising pay. We’ve talked about recruiting talent. But if we don’t invest in the conditions that keep great teachers teaching—and equip them with tools to thrive—then we’re spinning our wheels.

This plan proposes a three-tiered system of instructional elevation:

1. **Master Teaching Teams:** Each school will host a designated Master Teacher Team made up of proven instructional leaders across grade levels and subject areas. These teachers will receive a stipend and reduced non-instructional duties to coach peers, lead data analysis, and model high-impact strategies. This approach mirrors successful models in Dallas ISD and Washington, D.C., where student achievement rose sharply when peer-led instructional leadership was embedded in schools.
2. **Instructional Equity Audits:** Every school will conduct a semi-annual instructional equity audit—a focused, transparent review of curriculum delivery, access to advanced coursework, disciplinary data, and instructional materials. These audits will inform

school-based action plans and ensure no student is being underserved based on race, zip code, or learning difference.

3. **Professional Growth Pathways:** Brandywine School District will create dynamic professional learning pathways, linking real-time student data to PD offerings. For example, if reading scores stagnate in grade 3 districtwide, all third-grade teachers would receive targeted literacy coaching and the opportunity to collaborate with curriculum specialists and reading interventionists. The result? Development aligned with actual need, not generic webinars or one-size-fits-all training days.

Beyond structure, Brandywine School District must also address the morale crisis plaguing the profession. We propose:

- **Monthly Instructional Spotlights:** Publicly celebrate teacher excellence by recognizing standout lessons, student gains, or creative strategies in newsletters, school board meetings, and social media.
- **Instructional Innovation Grants:** Offer small grants (\$500–\$2,000) for teachers who propose and implement innovative instructional projects. These could include interdisciplinary units, community-based learning modules, or culturally responsive teaching materials.
- **Embedded Wellness and Planning Time:** Dedicate 90 minutes weekly in every school schedule for uninterrupted teacher planning and collaborative time—not duties, meetings, or monitoring. When teachers are given time to plan, they deliver better instruction. Period.

Instruction isn't a line item. It's the heart of everything. And teachers? They're not cogs in a system—they're the soul of the classroom. If we want to transform outcomes, rebuild trust, and lead in public education, we start by building a culture that treats educators like the difference-makers they are.

Because in the end, great schools don't just happen. They're built—one empowered teacher at a time.

Chapter 12:

Investing in Excellence — Teacher Pay and Competitive Standing

I've always believed that budgets are moral documents. They tell us, without spin or pretense, what we truly value.

So here's the hard truth: If we say we value public education—if we believe every child deserves an excellent teacher in every classroom—then we need to back it up. Not with lip service. With leadership. With investment. With real numbers that show we're serious.

And right now, Brandywine School District is at a crossroads.

Where We Are

Our teachers are doing more with less. They're showing up early, staying late, mentoring, tutoring, consoling, inspiring—and they're doing it while stretching every resource and sacrificing personal time. Yet despite all this, our compensation isn't keeping up—not with our neighboring districts, and not with the national trend.

In Brandywine, the average salary for district employees is **\$67,052**. A veteran teacher with 17 years of experience and a master's degree earns **\$85,324**—a number that might sound strong until you compare it to neighboring states like New Jersey, where the average teacher salary tops **\$82,877** across the board, and many districts offer starting pay over **\$60,000**.

Delaware's average salary for teachers is **\$71,186**, which puts us just below the national average of **\$72,030**. So yes, Brandywine offers competitive salaries *within* Delaware—but not *against* Pennsylvania and New Jersey, where we're losing talent. And talent loss has consequences.

What's at Stake

Every time we lose a great educator to another district or profession, it isn't just Brandywine that loses—it's the child who needed that teacher the most. It's the family relying on consistency. It's the student who might have turned a corner with the right mentor in their corner.

We're living in a moment when **3,000 students have left Brandywine over the past decade**. Many followed teachers who left first.

Let that sink in.

We're not just competing with charter schools—we're competing with neighboring states for teachers. For stability. For quality.

And every parent knows what this means: teacher turnover disrupts classrooms, demoralizes staff, and erodes trust in the system. We can't keep recruiting top talent if we're not retaining it.

What Works—and What Doesn't

Districts that pay well, treat their teachers as professionals, and provide clear pathways for growth have the best student outcomes. That's not theory—it's backed by decades of research.

Here's what doesn't work: assuming teachers will keep doing more for less. Pretending the issue is purely about money. It's not. It's about respect. It's about working conditions. It's about giving educators the tools, time, and trust to do what they do best—teach.

When we don't do that, they leave. And when they leave, so do families.

What We Can Do

As a school board member, I won't have a magic wand. But I do have a plan—and a track record of delivering results.

For eight years, I led New Castle County Council, overseeing **\$3.4 billion** in public funds without raising taxes. I know how to stretch dollars, build coalitions, and make government work for people. And I'll bring that same energy, transparency, and urgency to Brandywine.

We need to:

- **Establish a Compensation Review Committee** to benchmark Brandywine salaries against surrounding districts annually.
- **Pursue public-private partnerships** that fund teacher development and innovation without hitting taxpayers.
- **Ensure all raises are transparent and tied to retention, performance, and professional development**, not just cost-of-living increases.
- **Streamline administrative costs** and redirect savings toward classroom instruction and educator support.
- **Lobby state leaders for more equitable education funding** that reflects actual cost per student—currently over **\$24,000 per pupil** in Brandywine.

This isn't about spending more. It's about spending smart.

What It Will Cost If We Don't

We talk a lot about the cost of change. But what about the cost of inaction?

The cost of continued enrollment decline.

The cost of replacing burned-out teachers.

The cost of lagging performance, disengaged students, and a community that stops believing in its public schools.

You can't put a price tag on lost potential—but we all pay for it.

Where We Can Be

I see a future where Brandywine is the district others try to copy. Where talented educators stay, students thrive, and parents feel confident in their neighborhood schools.

That's not a pipe dream. That's what happens when we decide that our schools matter enough to lead, to invest, and to act.

It starts with us. It starts with this moment. It starts on the school board—and with your vote.

Let's show our teachers, our students, and our community that we mean what we say when we talk about excellence.

Let's build Brandywine's future—together.

Chapter 13.

Early Childhood Education

If we wait until third grade to fix the problem, we've already failed. By then, the gaps are wide, the confidence is shaken, and the climb is steep. The truth is plain and sobering: 90% of brain development happens before the age of five. That means by the time a child enters kindergarten, their trajectory—academic, emotional, social—is largely shaped.

So the question isn't whether early childhood education matters.

It's whether we have the courage to make it a top priority in Brandywine.

Right now, Brandywine School District operates just two Pre-K programs. That's not a system. That's a starting point. And it's far from enough for a district with more than 10,000 students and thousands of families who need—and deserve—early access to high-quality education.

This roadmap changes that.

We propose a **Pre-K Expansion Plan** that would double current capacity within three years. That means repurposing underutilized classroom space, expanding partnerships with local child care providers, and applying aggressively for federal Pre-K and Head Start grants. A recent federal Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership Grant provided up to \$1 million per site in other states. Brandywine can and must compete for those dollars.

We will also launch the **Brandywine School District Birth-to-5 Readiness Initiative**, a coordinated strategy bringing together educators, healthcare providers, and community groups to track developmental milestones, promote early literacy, and support parenting education. Families won't be left to figure it out alone—because school readiness starts at home, and strong families build strong learners.

We will train Pre-K educators in trauma-informed care, early intervention strategies, and culturally responsive instruction. Because this work isn't just about coloring inside the lines—it's about closing gaps before they open. Research shows children who attend high-quality Pre-K are more likely to graduate, less likely to need remediation, and more likely to become productive, contributing adults.

This isn't fluff. It's the foundation.

And for every dollar invested in early childhood education, communities reap up to \$7 in long-term economic and social benefits. That's not just smart policy. That's smart economics.

So here's the deal: If we want third-grade readers, middle school mathematicians, and high school graduates—we start by building confident, curious, kindergarten-ready children.

Because the future of Brandywine isn't waiting in high school hallways.

It's toddling through our front doors—right now.

Governor Meyer's Mandate—and Our Response

Governor Matt Meyer has made early childhood education a signature issue. He's committed to establishing universal pre-kindergarten across Delaware by the end of his term. He's asked tough questions that deserve real answers:

“What does that mean for equity, if we want to have a truly equitable society?... How do we make sure that equal opportunity starts really from the age of zero?”

He's right. And in Brandywine, we're not waiting for the perfect moment—or the perfect funding formula. We're planning for both the promise and the pitfalls.

Meyer has acknowledged the steep costs of quality early care, with some Delaware families paying as much as \$16,000 per year for childcare. His administration has pledged to collaborate with providers and pursue strategic partnerships. But even he admits, not every solution will come from the top down.

We agree. And that's why our plan is built to move—regardless of the pace of Dover. If the Governor delivers on his vision, we'll be ready to scale. If he doesn't, we'll still be ready to lead.

Because in Brandywine, we don't wait for policy to become practice.

We make it happen.

What If the Funding Doesn't Come?

What if the money doesn't come? What if the Governor's promises vanish into legislative gridlock or federal cutbacks?

Then we do what real leaders do—we adapt, and we don't hide.

Yes, there's a real possibility that Pre-K expansion and teacher support initiatives become unfunded mandates. We've seen it before: bold headlines from Dover, followed by shrinking checkbooks and political pivoting. But here's the difference—**we prepare now.**

Step 1: Leverage What We Have.

We begin by identifying underutilized facilities and reconfiguring existing classroom spaces for Pre-K without waiting on new construction. Brandywine School District already has buildings with excess capacity—space is money, and we’ll use it.

Step 2: Build Stronger Grant Infrastructure.

Other districts are winning federal Pre-K grants worth millions. We will establish a dedicated grant-writing and compliance team—or partner with existing county and state offices—to aggressively pursue Head Start, Early Learning Challenge, and Foundation grants. No more missing out because we didn’t apply.

Step 3: Phase Expansion Smartly.

Instead of launching a full-scale districtwide Pre-K program all at once, we phase it in over 3–5 years, prioritizing high-need ZIP codes first. This makes the budget predictable, manageable, and aligned with available dollars.

Step 4: Engage Partners.

We bring in community childcare providers, nonprofits, and health systems as collaborators, not competitors. They have the expertise. We have the reach. And together, we can serve more families at less cost to taxpayers.

Step 5: Cut Waste Elsewhere.

We scrutinize every non-instructional dollar in the existing \$257.7 million budget. If a contract isn’t helping kids learn or teachers teach—it’s on the chopping block. Redirecting just 2% of the current budget equals over \$5 million. That’s a serious down payment on early learning.

This isn’t about wishful thinking. It’s about disciplined, transparent planning. The work starts now—not when the check clears. Because if we wait for perfect conditions, our kids will be the ones left behind.

And in Brandywine, that’s not an option.

Chapter 14.

Modernizing Curriculum: Embracing AI, STEAM, Robotics, and Future-Ready Learning

Let’s be blunt: If we don’t evolve what we teach and how we teach it, we’ll fall behind—not just in rankings or reputation, but in preparing the next generation for the world that’s already here.

Artificial Intelligence isn’t the future; it’s the present. From healthcare to logistics, finance to design, AI is driving innovation, transforming workplaces, and redefining the skills employers need. A 2023 McKinsey report projected that by 2030, 70% of companies across sectors will

adopt some form of AI—and that U.S. workers will need to learn new skills to stay employed. Yet, most public schools are still teaching as if the year is 1995.

That changes here.

Brandywine’s Future-Ready Curriculum Plan launches a districtwide effort to integrate STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) with AI literacy, digital citizenship, and hands-on problem-solving—starting as early as elementary school. This isn’t just about coding or robotics clubs; it’s about weaving real-world relevance into every subject, every classroom, every grade.

We propose creating a **STEAM Innovation Lab** in each high school, equipped with 3D printers, robotics kits, virtual reality, and AI simulation tools. With seed investments of \$250,000 per school—fundable through Perkins V grants, state capital budgets, and public-private partnerships—these labs will become incubators of talent, creativity, and future-ready learning. Robotics will be an integral part of this initiative, from autonomous drones to prosthetic prototypes. Students will build, code, and compete—enhancing collaboration, engineering, and critical thinking skills.

We will also establish **AI + Arts Fusion Electives** at the middle school level—courses that explore how machine learning intersects with design, storytelling, and music. Why? Because studies show that music and the arts stimulate the same brain regions used in mathematical reasoning and innovation. Creativity isn’t fluff—it’s fuel for problem-solving.

To support this transformation, we will provide teachers with ongoing professional development in emerging tech, digital pedagogy, and adaptive learning tools. District-wide licensing of platforms like Khan Academy, Scratch, or Canva for Education will ensure that students aren’t just consuming technology—they’re creating with it.

We will also pursue partnerships with Delaware’s growing tech sector—companies like Zip Code Wilmington, CSC, and health-tech innovators—offering students pathways to internships, mentorships, and job-shadowing opportunities in fields where AI and STEAM skills are in high demand.

Digital skills are now as fundamental as reading and writing. From navigating AI tools to building a professional digital portfolio, today’s students must be fluent in the technologies shaping tomorrow’s economy. That’s why Brandywine’s Future-Ready Curriculum doesn’t just adopt digital learning—it embeds it. Every STEAM lesson, every AI elective, every lab experience is designed to build not just technical know-how, but digital citizenship and confidence. Students will not only use technology—they’ll shape it, code it, question it, and create with it.

And we’re not just imagining a future like this—

We’re already living in it.

Amazon uses AI to manage supply chains and power Alexa. JPMorgan uses AI to detect fraud and make investment decisions. Pfizer uses AI to accelerate vaccine development. Startups in education, healthcare, and media are building their entire business models on AI. Job postings for AI prompt engineers, automation strategists, and AI-integrated marketers are growing by the day—even entry-level positions expect digital fluency.

Right here in Delaware, Zip Code Wilmington is training residents in machine learning. ChristianaCare is applying AI to patient diagnostics. Local startups are designing AI tools for law firms and nonprofits. Our students shouldn't be on the outside looking in.

Across the nation, school districts are already embracing AI:

- **Connecticut:** Districts like East Hartford and Lebanon have integrated AI tools such as MagicSchool into classrooms, enhancing differentiated instruction and providing real-time feedback.
- **Texas:** Houston ISD partnered with Prof Jim Inc to generate AI-driven reading materials and introduced a "Fundamentals of Artificial Intelligence" elective.
- **Heartland States:** An initiative by Heartland Forward and Stemuli is introducing gamified AI curricula across 20 states, aiming to bridge the digital divide in rural communities.

Moreover, a recent RAND study found that 48% of school districts had trained teachers on AI use by fall 2024, a significant increase from the previous year.

Because in Brandywine, the goal isn't just graduation—it's preparation.

And the lesson we want every student to walk away with?

You're not just learning to pass the test.
You're learning to shape the world.

Chapter 15:

Capital Needs: Priorities Without Burdening Taxpayers

Capital Needs in the Brandywine School District: A Path Forward Without Raising Taxes

Walk through the doors of P.S. DuPont Middle School and you enter a living museum. Built in 1934, the building tells the story of Delaware's ambition at the height of the New Deal. It was a time when schools were meant to inspire—a time when marble floors and grand archways symbolized the public promise to educate every child, no matter their background. That promise still echoes through Brandywine School District today.

But now, it echoes down aging hallways and crumbling infrastructure.

This is the story of Brandywine School District: where history meets hardship—but also where vision, creativity, and leadership can meet the moment.

The Past: Brandywine Was Built to Serve

The Brandywine School District was formed in 1978, forged in the fires of desegregation and equity. But the roots run deeper. Its schools trace back to post-World War II suburbanization, when communities like Claymont, Talleyville, and Bellefonte grew rapidly with the expansion of DuPont, General Motors, and shipbuilding industries. From the 1950s through the 1970s, Brandywine School District schools were built with pride:

- **Brandywine High School (1956)**
- **Carrcroft Elementary (1957)**
- **Claymont Elementary (1960)**
- **Mount Pleasant High School (1964)**
- **Concord High School (1969)**

This construction boom paralleled northern New Castle County's rise as Delaware's industrial and economic heart. It was a time of optimism, civic engagement, and expanding middle-class opportunity. The Brandywine School District became a district that reflected this new American dream.

But as Delaware's economy shifted in the 1980s and 1990s, investment followed population growth southward—toward Middletown, Bear, and Odessa. The suburban sprawl that defined southern New Castle County also redirected state capital priorities. School districts like Appoquinimink flourished with modern buildings and multimillion-dollar campuses. Meanwhile, Brandywine School District schools aged quietly. Deferred maintenance became standard. Needed renovations were postponed year after year.

As President of New Castle County Council, I cast votes on dozens of development projects. I witnessed firsthand how infrastructure dollars, capital investments, and state resources overwhelmingly flowed to the middle and southern regions of the county—areas that boomed with planned communities, new schools, and new roads. I fought to ensure northern New Castle County was not forgotten. And while we won some victories—redirecting development toward smarter growth and negotiating hard-fought community concessions—the scale of revitalization needed for the Brandywine School District remains unmet.

Too often, our children are told they matter while watching others get the new schools, new buses, and new buildings. We owe them more than that. We owe them actions that reflect their worth.

The Present: Why Brandywine Stands at a Crossroads

Today, the Brandywine School District serves over 10,000 students across 17 schools in a 33-square-mile region that includes the City of Wilmington, Claymont, and Brandywine Hundred. It is one of the most socioeconomically diverse districts in the state. But diversity alone doesn't sustain schools—investment does.

A recent analysis reveals just how urgent the needs are:

- **Carrcroft Elementary School**, built in 1957, needs a full HVAC overhaul, a new roof, and ADA accessibility improvements.
📍 *Estimated cost: \$5–7 million*
- **Claymont Elementary School**, constructed in 1960, requires electrical rewiring, classroom modernization, and updated recreational spaces.
📍 *Estimated cost: \$6–8 million*
- **Brandywine High School**, opened in 1956, demands science lab renovations, new windows, and field drainage improvements.
📍 *Estimated cost: \$10–12 million*
- **P.S. duPont Middle School**, dating back to 1934, faces structural degradation, asbestos mitigation, and obsolete technology systems.
📍 *Estimated cost: \$8–10 million*
- **District-wide upgrades** include Wi-Fi infrastructure, security systems, and LED lighting retrofits.
📍 *Estimated cost: \$15–20 million*

 **Total need: \$44–57 million.**

For two consecutive years, the Brandywine School District has received **no capital funding** from the Delaware General Assembly. Not one dollar.

In contrast, the Appoquinimink School District received funding for:

- New middle and high schools on the Summit Campus (\$100 million)
- North Elementary expansion (\$20 million)
- Clayton Intermediate expansion (\$25 million)

Red Clay Consolidated School District secured:

- Warner Elementary renovations (\$10 million)
- Linden Hill Elementary reconstruction (\$30 million)
- District-wide accessibility and safety upgrades (\$15 million)

And yet, Brandywine School District—home to the state's largest city and some of its oldest schools—waits.

The Future: A New Path Without New Taxes

Let's be clear: We are not going to raise taxes. We are going to raise expectations. Here's how:

1. Force the General Assembly to Prioritize Equity

- Form a coalition with other neglected school districts and present a unified front in Dover.
- Demand proportional infrastructure investment based on need and building age—not just enrollment growth.
- Submit a capital needs package with matching funding models using state programs like the Minor Capital Improvements Program.

2. Tap Federal Infrastructure and Sustainability Grants

- **Renew America's Schools Grant Program:** Apply for HVAC and lighting retrofits.
- **USDA Rural Development Community Facilities Program:** Leverage eligibility in fringe zones.
- **EPA Clean School Bus Program:** Electrify our fleet, reduce emissions, and cut operating costs.
- **EECBG (Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant):** Fund insulation, lighting, and smart energy controls.

These programs offer up to 100% coverage for qualifying projects. With well-written, targeted proposals, the Brandywine School District can unlock millions.

3. Leverage Public-Private Partnerships (P3s)

- Partner with trade unions to construct CTE wings at schools—shared training sites for workforce pipelines.
- Secure naming rights deals for new athletic fields, theaters, and innovation labs from regional employers like DuPont, AstraZeneca, ChristianaCare, and Chemours.
- Develop co-use agreements with nonprofits and local businesses to create evening adult education centers, co-working innovation labs, or community health hubs.

4. Foundation and Philanthropic Capital Matching

Target Delaware-based and national organizations such as:

- **The Longwood Foundation**
- **The Delaware Community Foundation**
- **WSFS Bank Charitable Giving Fund**
- **Bloomberg Philanthropies Education Fund**
- **MacKenzie Scott's Yield Giving Open Call**

Each year, tens of millions are distributed for education, equity, and facilities-based improvement. These funds are competitive—but Brandywine's history, diversity, and vision make us a compelling candidate.

5. Maximize Existing Assets Without Selling Our Soul

- Conduct a full **facilities audit**: Identify non-instructional spaces for leasing or repurposing.
- Use underutilized buildings for satellite services (e.g., early childhood centers, behavioral health partnerships).
- Bundle facility uses in grant applications (e.g., combine a security grant with broadband expansion for double impact).

6. Reignite Community Ownership and Oversight

- Launch a **Capital Projects Dashboard** with timelines, budgets, and photos for transparency.
- Convene a **Facilities Advisory Task Force** of parents, educators, industry leaders, and students.
- Host biannual “State of Our Schools” town halls that show—not just tell—how improvements are being made.

This is how we restore trust: with visibility, accountability, and truth.

Beyond the Bricks: What This Means

This isn’t just about fixing roofs or replacing wires. This is about telling every child in the Brandywine School District that they matter—**not in words**, but in action.

That they don’t need to transfer zip codes to feel seen. That their neighborhood schools are safe, beautiful, and modern. That their success is not determined by the age of the building they walk into.

As President of New Castle County Council, I saw the whole map. I watched southern New Castle County expand while northern New Castle County was asked to make do. I worked across party lines and within communities to demand better. But we are not done.

Because when we invest in the Brandywine School District, we don’t just invest in classrooms. We invest in equity. In dignity. In democracy.

We don’t have to raise taxes. We just have to raise our voices.

And when we do—Brandywine will rise.

The next chapter of Brandywine School District isn’t written yet. But together, we will build it.

Chapter 16:

Technology Infrastructure and Innovation Labs

Ten years ago, if you walked into most Brandywine classrooms, you'd find chalkboards—not smartboards. If there were computers, they were likely clunky desktops clustered in the back of the room, slow to boot and slower to connect. The idea of a student logging in from home, collaborating across schools, or using VR to explore Mars or ancient Egypt—those were dreams, not deliverables.

We were at the very beginning of a technological shift. But we didn't invest boldly enough. We made some upgrades—yes. We rolled out Chromebooks here and there. We installed Wi-Fi, though not always reliably. We adapted—but we didn't transform.

Then came the pandemic, and everything changed.

Suddenly, every student needed a device. Every teacher had to pivot to online instruction—often without training, and without consistent tools. The cracks in our system became canyons. Teachers scrambled. Families struggled. And while we got through it, many students fell behind.

Some never caught up.

Today, we're in a fragile place. A decade removed from blackboards—but still far from where we should be. Our technology is aging. Our infrastructure is uneven. Our cybersecurity is vulnerable. And most importantly, we still don't have dedicated spaces—**Innovation Labs**—where students can do more than absorb information. Spaces where they can create. Build. Discover who they want to become.

But we can change that—*starting now*.

Where We Are—and Where We Can Go

This is not a story of failure. It's a story of *urgency*. And *possibility*.

We're spending **\$24,901 per student**, more than nearly every neighboring district. But in many classrooms, students are still sharing outdated laptops. Only **37%** of rooms have interactive boards. And many buildings have Wi-Fi “dead zones.” There are schools with no 3D printers, no robotics kits, no production labs, and no coding programs.

Meanwhile, **Lower Merion School District** is investing in AI curriculum and building biotech partnerships. **Howard County Public Schools** is running tech-infused STEM camps and career simulations. **Newark, NJ** is outfitting schools with next-gen classroom technology through targeted grants and private partnerships.

These students aren't smarter than ours. They're just being **equipped differently**.

I believe Brandywine students deserve better. They deserve more.

They deserve a future that's not limited by what's in their building—but expanded by what's possible in their minds.

Looking Ahead: Brandywine as a Leader in Learning

My five-year plan doesn't just promise results. It creates a culture.

A culture where students don't just learn about the world—they build it.

A culture where our schools don't just keep up with the times—they shape the future.

A culture where innovation is not a privilege—but a promise.

This is how we reimagine public education in Brandywine.

This is how we prepare every child for a world we can't yet see.

And this is how, together, we build the most forward-thinking, equity-driven, community-rooted school district in Delaware.

We won't wait for the future.

We'll build it—one classroom, one innovation lab, one student at a time.

The Plan: Five Years to Future-Ready Schools

Years 1–2: Laying the Digital Foundation

- Conduct a **districtwide tech audit**
- Install **high-speed Wi-Fi** across all schools
- Launch a **device refresh program**
- Deploy **interactive learning boards**
- Modernize **cybersecurity** and data protections

📌 **Estimated Cost:** \$12 million

💡 **Funding Sources:** Federal E-Rate, Delaware's Capital Improvement Plan, corporate partnerships with DuPont, AstraZeneca, ChristianaCare, JPMorgan Chase, and others

Years 3–4: Launching Middle & High School Innovation Labs

Each lab will include:

- 3D printing stations
- Robotics and AI programming kits
- Virtual and augmented reality tools
- Audio/video production studios
- Career and technical education hubs

💡 **Curriculum developed in collaboration with:**

- University of Delaware's College of Education and Human Development
- Delaware Technical Community College's IT and engineering departments
- Delaware State University
- Wilmington University

- **Local business leaders and trade unions**

✚ **Estimated Cost:** \$8 million

💡 **Funding Sources:** Perkins V grants, ESSER III carryover, private sector sponsorships (with naming rights), and foundation grants

Year 5: Expanding Access and Ensuring Sustainability

- Launch scaled **Innovation Studios** in elementary schools
- Fund **tech-integration training** and professional certifications for teachers
- Establish a **Technology & Innovation Advisory Council**
- Implement a **sustainable maintenance and replacement cycle**

✚ **Estimated Cost:** \$4.5 million

💡 **Funding Sources:** Annual capital reserves, Department of Education grants, community fundraising initiatives

What It Means for Our Students—and Why It Matters Now

We’re not just buying new equipment. We’re reshaping how our students see themselves.

A fifth grader who learns to build a robot or fly a drone doesn’t just pass a science test. They see the world differently. They ask questions differently. They start to imagine what they might become.

A high schooler who edits a short film in a production studio may discover their voice for the first time—and decide that voice is worth sharing.

A middle schooler who simulates an open-heart surgery or designs a wind turbine isn’t just learning content. They’re building confidence—and carving a path toward purpose.

These are not “extras.” These are the experiences that *change lives*.

Because when kids see more—they *dream* more.

When they dream more—they *do* more.

And when they *do more*—they lift all of us with them.

The Community Impact

Let’s talk about what this means for everyone—not just students.

- **Teachers** will have better tools, less stress, and more time to connect with kids.
- **Parents** will see their children engaged, motivated, and thriving.
- **Homeowners** will see rising property values tied to high-performing schools.
- **Employers** will find a homegrown workforce ready for tomorrow’s jobs.

This isn't just a school board initiative. This is an economic development plan. A community equity plan. A promise to future generations.

Where We'll Be in Five Years—and Beyond

If we act now—*boldly, strategically, and together*—here's what Brandywine will look like by 2030:

- Every student with access to cutting-edge tools.
- Every classroom a connected, creative space.
- Every school a hub of innovation.
- A district where opportunity doesn't depend on your zip code—but on your imagination.

And in the years beyond that?

We'll have former Brandywine students designing software, discovering cures, building companies, filming documentaries, launching clean energy startups, writing code for NASA, or running for office. Not just dreaming it—*doing it*.

Because we dared to invest not just in what was—but in what *could be*.

Chapter 17:

“Three Roads, One Future: Preparing Every Brandywine Student for the World Ahead”

There was a time—not too long ago—when the path after high school felt relatively fixed. A college degree was the gold standard, a trade was often seen as second-best, and entrepreneurship was something for the daring few. But the world has changed, and the Brandywine School District needs to change with it.

Where We Were

In the early 2000s, Brandywine, like many suburban districts, measured success primarily by how many students went to college. Trade careers were quietly discouraged, and entrepreneurship wasn't part of the conversation. Programs were created with good intentions, but the world outpaced them. Automation, AI, rising college debt, and the explosion of the gig economy rewrote the rules while we were still teaching yesterday's playbook.

What We've Done

There have been steps forward. Brandywine began to recognize the importance of career pathways beyond college. Dual enrollment and some CTE (Career and Technical Education) programs expanded. A handful of students found apprenticeships or took business courses. But these programs remain under-resourced and fragmented. They serve dozens when they could—and should—serve hundreds.

According to the Delaware Department of Education, only **41% of Brandywine high school graduates enrolled in college within 12 months** of graduation in 2022. Of those, nearly **1 in 3 failed to return after their first year**. Meanwhile, fewer than **5%** entered the trades through formal apprenticeships, and even fewer launched a business or pursued entrepreneurial training.

We've been preparing kids for one road in a world where there are many.

Where We Are Now

Today, Brandywine sits at a crossroads. Our students are asking urgent questions:

"Is college worth the debt?"

"How can I learn a trade and get paid while doing it?"

"What if I want to start my own business instead?"

But too often, the system isn't giving them answers—it's giving them a one-size-fits-all model that no longer fits. While schools in neighboring states and even other Delaware districts are investing in robust career academies, entrepreneurship incubators, and modern trade pipelines, Brandywine is still catching up.

Consider this:

- **Red Clay School District** recently expanded its partnership with Delaware Technical Community College to offer **paid apprenticeships and certifications in HVAC, plumbing, and electrical work**.
- In **Appoquinimink**, students are launching real businesses before graduation through an **Entrepreneurial Pathways program** that connects them with local mentors, business grants, and marketing support.
- Nationally, districts like **Dallas ISD** in Texas have created "P-TECH" high schools where students graduate with both a high school diploma and a no-cost associate degree in high-demand fields.

Brandywine has the talent. What we lack is the structure and commitment to scale.

What We Can Be in Five Years

Now picture this: It's 2030. A student at Mount Pleasant High earns their NCCER welding certification by 11th grade and is hired into a union apprenticeship upon graduation—debt-free and earning \$60,000 by age 20. Another at Concord pitches a social enterprise to a panel of local investors, receives a startup micro-grant, and begins selling products online. A Brandywine High student, the first in their family to consider college, earns an associate degree through dual enrollment and enters the University of Delaware as a junior.

We can create these stories. But only if we act.

The Plan

1. **Create Three Clear Pathways: College, Skilled Trades, and Entrepreneurship**
 - Every student chooses a track starting in 9th grade, with flexibility to shift.

- Each track offers specialized advisors, experiences, and measurable outcomes.
- 2. **Expand Dual Enrollment and Early College Access**
 - Partner aggressively with local universities and community colleges to ensure that **every student can earn college credits before graduation**, without cost to families.
- 3. **Build a True Trades Pipeline**
 - Formalize partnerships with **unions, technical schools, and industry** for internships, pre-apprenticeships, and job placements.
 - Incorporate industry certifications into the high school curriculum, aligned to labor market data.
- 4. **Launch Brandywine Incubator: Student Entrepreneurship Lab**
 - A district-wide initiative housed at one of our schools that allows students to **design, launch, and scale their own ventures** with mentoring from local entrepreneurs.
 - Leverage grant funding, CDFIs, and SBA programs for teen micro-grants and business licenses.
- 5. **Scorecard & Accountability Dashboard**
 - Publish annual outcomes by pathway: number of students enrolled, certifications earned, businesses launched, college credits completed, post-graduation employment, etc.

The Cost If We Act

Initial investment: approximately **\$4.2 million over five years**. This includes staff training, partnerships, curriculum development, and technology infrastructure.

Offset by: federal Perkins V funds, ESSER reserves, Delaware Workforce Development Grants, and CTE Innovation Challenge funds.

The Cost If We Don't

- Continued enrollment decline.
- Higher dropout rates.
- Families opting for charter, private, or out-of-state districts.
- Graduates unprepared for a future that has already arrived.

Every year we delay, we lose another class to confusion, debt, or underemployment.

What Works (and What Doesn't)

✓ Works:

- Career academies with real industry input.
- Paid internships and youth apprenticeships.
- Early exposure to entrepreneurship and college-level work.
- Partnerships with employers and higher ed institutions.

✗ Doesn't Work:

- One-size-fits-all models.
- Ignoring market data.
- Making trades and entrepreneurship feel like “Plan B.”
- Talking about workforce readiness without funding it.

The Bottom Line

We don’t have to pick one path for our kids. We just have to build all three—and build them well. It’s time to stop forcing our students to fit into an outdated mold and start building a system that fits them.

Because whether it’s college, the trades, or entrepreneurship—**our job is to make sure every student leaves Brandywine with a future they believe in.**

If we do this right, we’ll not only rebuild confidence in our schools—we’ll change lives.

Chapter 18.

Public Safety and School Climate

From Discipline to Dignity: Rebuilding the Foundation of Learning and Safety in Brandywine.

Where We Were

Let’s go back.

Five years ago, Brandywine School District was already under strain. Behavioral incidents were rising. Classrooms were becoming harder to manage. Suspension rates—especially for students of color and students with disabilities—were disproportionately high. And the tools available to teachers? Limited, inconsistent, often reactive.

In 2019 alone, Brandywine reported more than **4,000 student disciplinary incidents**—most involving disorderly conduct, fighting, or insubordination. Teachers were sounding the alarm. Parents were losing confidence. Students, many already facing mental health challenges, were falling through the cracks.

And the go-to solution?

Too often, it was removal. Detention. Suspension. Exclusion. The system wasn’t asking, *why is this happening?*—it was simply asking, *how fast can we get this student out of the room?*

That may temporarily restore order—but it doesn’t restore kids.

What We've Done—And What I Learned Leading Through Crisis

Since then, Brandywine has taken steps in the right direction: Social Emotional Learning. Restorative practices. The hiring of more school counselors. New training modules for staff. These are not small things—but they aren’t yet systemwide, and they haven’t yet solved the core challenge.

Meanwhile, during my time as President of New Castle County Council, I saw what *real intervention* looks like—because I had to lead through one of the most emotionally volatile periods in our lifetime: the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tensions in our communities were running high. Domestic violence reports surged. Neighbors were calling about everything—property lines, loud kids, barking dogs, parking disputes—every little conflict started to feel like a crisis. And many of them *were*.

But instead of immediately turning to law enforcement, I often turned first to our **Behavioral Health Unit**—a skilled, compassionate team we expanded during my tenure. I didn’t have the authority to put them in schools—but I could—and did—fund more of them in our **Public Safety Department**.

That unit became my *go-to*. They had different tools in their toolbox. They de-escalated conflict. They connected people to services. They followed up. They offered a human alternative to arrest—and often achieved better outcomes.

But make no mistake—**not every situation calls for behavioral health alone**.

Some crises demand the presence of law enforcement. **No one—no student, no teacher, no parent—should ever feel unsafe, bullied, threatened, or harmed**. And that’s why we need **both pathways**—behavioral intervention *and* professional policing—so we can respond based on the real needs of each situation.

Where We Are Now: What’s Working, and What Isn’t

Brandywine currently uses **School Resource Officers (SROs)** across its middle and high schools. Many SROs do an admirable job—they build relationships with students, de-escalate physical conflicts, and provide a visible deterrent when needed. When properly trained and fully integrated into the school culture, SROs can help students feel safer—and that matters.

But here’s the challenge: SROs aren’t trained behavioral therapists. They are not counselors. And some teachers report that SROs are too often left to handle **situations that should be addressed with emotional support, not disciplinary action**.

At the same time, **teachers are deeply frustrated**—and rightfully so.

They’re seeing students act out, disrupt lessons, show signs of stress and trauma—and they’re not getting the support they need. A 2023 internal survey showed that **more than 60% of teachers in Brandywine** cited **classroom behavior and student discipline** as one of their top three daily challenges.

They don't want to suspend kids. They don't want to label them. But they also don't want chaos. They want help. They want systems that *work*.

Where We Can Be in Five Years—If We Act Now

Imagine this:

It's 2030. A 7th grader named Aaliyah gets overwhelmed. Something happens at home. She lashes out in class. Five years ago, she would've been sent out, maybe suspended. But now, a trained behavioral support specialist meets her where she is. They talk. They plan. She returns to class calm, supported, and still learning.

Another student, Jamal, makes a violent threat. The school doesn't hesitate. They contact both the SRO and behavioral health—because in this case, it's serious. Everyone gets to safety. The threat is addressed. The student gets the help he needs—or, if necessary, is removed to protect others.

That's what a real system looks like.

If we act now, we can:

- ✅ **Reach the national gold standard** of 1 counselor for every 250 students
- ✅ **Hire more behavioral health specialists** across all schools
- ✅ **Launch building-based “climate teams”** with student, teacher, and parent input
- ✅ **Provide mandatory, ongoing training** for staff, SROs, and administrators in de-escalation, trauma-informed care, and restorative practices
- ✅ **Partner with local nonprofits** to offer mentoring, mental health services, and community support in and out of school
- ✅ **Design clear protocols** that help determine when to call SROs and when to bring in behavioral support

Estimated cost? Roughly **\$3 million over five years**—a fraction of our budget, but an investment that could change the entire atmosphere of learning in our district.

The Cost If We Don't

We don't have to guess what happens if we do nothing. We already see it.

- Burned-out teachers leaving mid-year.
- Kids walking the halls instead of sitting in class.
- Parents losing faith in the system.
- Students falling behind—or falling apart.

A 2022 report by the **Delaware Department of Education** showed that **disruptive classroom behavior and student disengagement were among the top reasons for teacher attrition statewide.**

And across the country, the **National Center for Education Statistics** reports that **students in unsafe or disorderly environments are 30% less likely to meet academic benchmarks** in reading and math.

So let's be honest—the cost of inaction isn't just lost instruction time. It's lost *futures*.

What Works—And What We Must Learn From

Look at **Laurel School District** in southern Delaware. Through a partnership with the University of Delaware, they embedded trauma-informed support, coaching, and family engagement. Within three years, disciplinary referrals dropped 40%. Achievement rose. Teacher satisfaction improved.

Nationally, schools in **Chicago and Minneapolis** that rebalanced their SRO approach—using them for true threats, while expanding behavioral support staff—saw suspensions fall and student satisfaction rise.

The common thread? **Options. Training. Balance. Accountability.**

The Story We Can Tell—If We Choose to Write It Together

This isn't just about safety. It's about *possibility*.

When kids feel safe, they take risks—in the right ways. They speak up. They try new things. They imagine a future that doesn't just happen to them—they shape it.

That's what I want for every child in Brandywine.

Let's not force teachers to choose between order and compassion. Let's give them the tools—and teams—they need.

Let's not keep asking SROs to do jobs they weren't trained for—or expect behavioral health to manage physical threats without backup.

Let's build a school district where everyone—students, staff, and families—feels protected, respected, and *heard*.

When I was Council President, I didn't choose between public safety and support—I chose *both*, based on the situation. That's how we prevented arrests, reduced harm, and kept communities intact during a pandemic.

Now, we can do the same for our schools.

Because when school is safe, when the culture is right, *everything else becomes possible*.

And that's the Brandywine I want to build—with you.

Chapter 19:

Charter School Competition: Reclaiming Enrollment Where We Were: The Shift We Didn't Want to See

Ten years ago, my next-door neighbors were a young family—two kids, full of potential. They moved into our community because they believed in it. They wanted their children to grow up here. But five years later, just as their oldest was about to enter Brandywine public schools, they sold their home and left.

They didn't leave for a job. Or family. They left for something much more sobering.

They left for **better schools**.

And I wish I could say they were the only ones.

But the couple who bought that house? They now have two young children of their own. And just this week, in a quiet, matter-of-fact conversation, they told me they're moving next year.

The reason? Again: **they want better public schools for their kids**.

Just a few blocks away, a single mother—smart, hardworking, running her own business—is homeschooling her young daughter. Not because she has extra time. Not because it's easy. But because she simply doesn't believe Brandywine public schools are a safe or effective place for her daughter to learn.

These families aren't outliers. They're the canaries in the coal mine. And if we keep ignoring them, we'll lose not just enrollment—we'll lose the very purpose of public education.

What We've Done: The Fight to Hold On

Brandywine School District has tried. Magnet programs. Early college. Partnerships with higher education. Career pathways. And dedicated educators working overtime to prove public schools can deliver.

But for too long, we've been reacting to charter school competition instead of understanding it. Families aren't choosing charter schools or moving across state lines because they want to betray public education. They're doing it because **they don't believe we'll change fast enough to meet their kids' needs**.

And they're tired of waiting.

In the last decade, **Brandywine has lost more than 2,000 students to charter schools and school choice transfers**. That's not just a shift in numbers. That's **millions in lost funding, weakened school communities, and a shattered social contract** between families and the district.

Where We Are Now: A Crisis of Confidence

Let's face the hard truth: Brandywine is no longer the first choice for too many families.

They hear about the academic underperformance. They talk to teachers who are exhausted and unsupported. They see suspension rates. They hear stories from neighbors, co-workers, and church members. And they ask: *"Why should I stay? Why should I risk my child's education hoping the system improves?"*

We're not losing to charter schools because they have better buildings. We're losing because they're offering **something we've failed to consistently deliver: a clear vision, smaller class sizes, responsive leadership, and the appearance—if not always the reality—of a better chance**.

According to the **Delaware Department of Education**, Brandywine's overall student proficiency is **below the state average** in both English Language Arts and Math. Meanwhile, charter schools like Newark Charter and MOT continue to attract families across New Castle County with **waiting lists that stretch into the hundreds**.

Parents aren't waiting for Brandywine to get it right. And neither are the charter schools.

Where We Can Be in Five Years—If We Act Now

We can't match charters by copying them. We have to do what public schools were always meant to do—but better. We have to:

- Deliver **academic excellence with accountability**
- Prioritize **safe, supportive school climates** where teachers can teach and students can learn
- Make sure **every child has access to enrichment**—arts, STEM, athletics, and real-world career prep
- Provide **true transparency and family voice** in school decisions
- Tell our story—and back it up with results.

Let's create a **five-year enrollment recovery plan**, modeled on the best national turnarounds. That means:

- Rebuilding neighborhood trust through **open forums, family liaisons, and parent decision councils**

- Expanding **early learning and Pre-K options** to keep families from walking away before Kindergarten
- Elevating **data-driven, replicable school improvement models**—not more pilots that quietly fade
- Launching a **bold communications campaign** to reintroduce Brandywine schools to the families we've lost

If we commit to this work, we can **reverse the enrollment loss**, restore funding, and rebuild Brandywine as a district families run *to*, not *from*.

The Cost If We Do Something—And the Cost If We Don't

The cost to implement a recovery and growth strategy? **An estimated \$1.5 to \$2 million** over the first two years, invested in academic acceleration, climate support, parent outreach, and leadership development.

The cost if we don't? **We keep losing \$8,000–\$14,000 per student per year** in state and local funding with every departure. We lose the trust of families who become our critics instead of our champions. We lose teachers who feel unsupported. We lose community.

And most importantly? We lose **children's futures** to systems that were supposed to serve them.

What Works—And What We Must Learn From

Across the country, districts like **Indianapolis, Camden, and Denver** have faced declining enrollment—and fought back with bold, transparent reforms focused on academic results, family voice, and climate.

In Delaware, **Laurel School District** and **Red Clay** are steadily gaining momentum by building school-level autonomy and community-based accountability structures. They're not perfect—but they're gaining students while Brandywine is losing them.

What doesn't work? Pretending the problem will fix itself. Dismissing parent concerns. Protecting underperformance. And siloing good ideas until they fade from lack of funding or leadership.

The Story We Can Still Write—If We Choose To

Families like my neighbors aren't demanding perfection. They're asking for **hope**. For proof that this district sees them, hears them, and is serious about change.

They shouldn't have to move to Pennsylvania for that.

That single mother shouldn't have to homeschool because she feels abandoned by her local system.

These are not extreme choices. They're *costly sacrifices*—in time, money, and faith.

We can win those families back. We can offer them a public school system they believe in again. One that opens opportunity, not excuses. One that reclaims its promise—and gives every child the chance to thrive.

But we have to move. And we have to move now.

Because **they're not waiting**.

And neither should we.

Chapter 20:

Community Engagement and Governance

The Heart of a District: When Everyone Has a Seat at the Table

Where We Were

Ten years ago, community engagement in Brandywine School District was something that happened *to* people, not *with* them. School board meetings were sparsely attended and often hard to follow. Parents felt unheard. Teachers felt unsupported. Students—especially those most in need—felt invisible.

Only 17% of families regularly participated in school events, and fewer than 5% of community members without children ever engaged with their neighborhood school. Trust was fractured, especially in historically underserved areas of the district. Decisions were made behind closed doors. Community input was more often a formality than a force that shaped policy.

And it showed—in the numbers, in the morale, in the outcomes.

In 2015, Brandywine School District ranked in the bottom third of Delaware districts for family engagement and transparency, according to state Department of Education survey data.

This wasn't just a public relations problem. It was an equity problem. Because when parents and communities aren't engaged, achievement gaps widen, behavioral challenges increase, and the public turns its back on public schools.

What We've Done

Then, something shifted.

Under pressure from parents, advocates, and a changing electorate, Brandywine started listening. Not perfectly. Not quickly. But deliberately.

- **New family engagement coordinators** were placed in schools with high needs.
- **The District Success Plan** was updated to include transparency and communication as core pillars.
- **Committees for finance, facilities, curriculum, and wellness** opened to public members—bringing dozens of new voices to the table.
- **Town halls** became more frequent and accessible, livestreamed and archived.
- **Surveys and listening tours** replaced top-down mandates.

Participation tripled in five years. The tone changed. Parents weren't just spectators; they were partners.

Even more significantly, we began **connecting engagement to student outcomes**—something few districts in Delaware had done.

According to the 2023 Brandywine School District Climate Report:

- Schools with high parent engagement saw **20% fewer behavior referrals**.
- Students in those schools were **14% more likely to meet grade-level benchmarks**.

The community had gone from passive observers to active collaborators. And that changed everything.

Where We Are Now

We're in a better place. But not the place we need to be.

Community engagement is still uneven across the district. Participation is higher in the more affluent northern areas and lower in the working-class and diverse communities toward the south. Language access remains a barrier. Digital divides persist. Some of our most important stakeholders—students themselves—still don't feel heard.

Governance is more transparent, but still reactive. The board does more listening, but it lacks the structure and vision to *lead* a truly community-driven district into the future.

And perhaps most critically: **we still haven't unlocked the full potential of what community-driven schools can be.**

Where We Can Be in Five Years—If We Act Now

Let's imagine what Brandywine could look like by 2030 if we fully commit to bold, equity-centered community governance:

- **Every school has a functioning School-Based Advisory Council**, with real decision-making authority, made up of parents, students, teachers, and community leaders.
- **Governance becomes proactive**, with families shaping the budget before it's passed—not after.

- **A district-wide Civic Engagement Dashboard** publicly tracks participation by school, race, income, and neighborhood—so we know who’s missing from the table.
- **Partnerships with nonprofits and faith-based institutions** provide wraparound services—mental health, tutoring, job training—turning schools into neighborhood hubs.
- **Student leadership councils** ensure policies reflect lived experiences—not just adult assumptions.

Districts that have done this—like Montclair, NJ, or Madison, WI—have seen **increased achievement, improved teacher retention, and decreased absenteeism**.

The potential is real.

But only if we act.

What It Will Take

- **A five-year governance action plan**, updated annually with measurable benchmarks for engagement and transparency.
- **An Office of Community Partnership and Equity**, staffed with bilingual outreach coordinators and data analysts.
- **Budget allocations for parent and student stipends**, to ensure low-income families can afford to participate in governance.
- **Investment in public communications infrastructure**, including mobile apps, robocalls, multilingual messaging, and virtual participation options.

Estimated cost: **\$1.5 million over 5 years**—less than 0.3% of the annual district budget.

Return on investment: measurable gains in achievement, equity, and public trust.

The Cost If We Don’t

If we don’t invest in community engagement:

- Achievement gaps will persist—or widen.
- Charter schools will continue to siphon off students, money, and momentum.

Brandywine has lost over **1,200 students to charters** in the last five years, taking nearly **\$18 million annually** in funding with them.

- Taxpayers will disengage. Bond referendums will fail. Families will flee to private schools or other districts.
- Teachers will burn out without community support.
- Most importantly—**we will waste potential**. Potential in our students, in our neighborhoods, and in ourselves.

What Works (and What Doesn’t)

Works:

- Collaborative governance models in Boston and Oakland that give parents real decision-making authority.
- Baltimore’s Parent University—offering skill-building for families and engagement incentives.
- Transparent dashboards and multilingual outreach in Fairfax County, VA, which boosted engagement by over 60% in three years.

Doesn’t Work:

- Token committees with no authority.
- Sporadic listening sessions with no follow-up.
- Communications that rely solely on email and English.

Conclusion: Community is the Curriculum

In the end, education is not just what happens in the classroom. It’s what happens when a whole community believes in its children—and in each other.

Community engagement and governance aren’t extras. They are the foundation of everything we do. They build the trust that keeps students in our schools, the relationships that support teachers, and the vision that gives families hope.

As Karen Hartley-Nagle says:

“When we bring everyone to the table—especially the ones who’ve been left out—we don’t just improve schools. We change lives. We expand possibilities. And we raise the future together.”

That’s the choice in front of us.

And that’s how we build Brandywine’s future.

Chapter 21.

Transparency and Trust in Governance

There’s a reason why people say, “Sunlight is the best disinfectant.” When the lights are on, fewer bad decisions are made behind closed doors. Trust is built—or broken—on what the public sees. And what they’ve seen in public education governance across the country, and yes, here in Brandywine School District, hasn’t always inspired confidence.

Where We Were: Behind the Curtain

Let’s not sugarcoat it. For too long, decisions about our children’s education were made in meeting rooms with poor visibility—sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. In Brandywine,

board meetings have often lacked accessible materials, left community members confused by jargon, or moved forward with key votes with little community input. And when parents did speak up, many felt like they weren't heard.

It wasn't just about tone—it was about access.

Meeting agendas were posted late. Minutes weren't easy to find. Video archives—if they existed—were incomplete. Committee meetings, where much of the real decision-making happens, operated in obscurity. And in the absence of clear, consistent communication, rumors filled the void.

In 2018, *Education Week* surveyed parents nationwide and found that only **23%** felt they had any influence over school board decisions. In Delaware, fewer than **15%** of eligible voters cast ballots in local school board races. Why? Because people have been conditioned to believe their voices don't matter. That the decisions have already been made. That their presence won't change the outcome.

When transparency falters, trust erodes—and once lost, trust is difficult to regain.

What We've Done: The First Steps Toward Openness

To be fair, there have been efforts to improve. Brandywine School District began live streaming board meetings in recent years. Some agendas now include links to supporting documents. The district launched “community conversations” and listening sessions—small but meaningful moves toward public engagement.

But the truth? **We're behind.**

Behind Christina, which has launched a real-time budget dashboard accessible to any taxpayer. Behind Red Clay, which established citizen advisory committees that meet monthly with board liaisons.

Behind Colonial, which not only livestreams but timestamps every agenda item and decision for public review.

Nationally, school districts in Massachusetts and California have adopted “participatory budgeting”—inviting students, parents, and teachers to help decide how to spend a portion of the school budget. In Chicago, *My Voice, My School* surveys are administered to tens of thousands of families and publicly reported with actions tied to community feedback.

Brandywine, despite a passionate and engaged community, has not yet fully opened its doors.

Where We Are Now: At a Crossroads

We are standing in a moment of decision. The question is simple: will we govern in the shadows, or lead in the light?

Currently, Brandywine is facing declining enrollment, fractured trust with portions of the community, and deeply divided public opinion on everything from capital needs to curriculum. These challenges are real—but they are not insurmountable.

Here's the thing: transparency isn't just a virtue. It's a **strategy**. It builds community trust. It empowers families. It gives teachers, administrators, and students a voice. And it creates a system of accountability that prevents failure before it begins.

In short, transparency **delivers results**.

What It Means for Kids: Seeing Themselves in the System

When governance is transparent, something remarkable happens: children see adults modeling integrity. Students begin to believe their voices matter. A fifth grader who watches her mom speak at a board meeting and get a real response? She grows up knowing she has agency. A teenager who learns how budgets are built understands power—and maybe imagines one day holding it.

This isn't abstract. It's developmental. Children who feel their communities are responsive and just are more likely to vote, more likely to lead, and more likely to dream beyond their zip code.

Trust in governance isn't just about adults. It's about shaping how kids see the world—and their place in it.

What We Can Be: A Model for the Nation

Imagine Brandywine in five years:

- Every board and committee meeting livestreamed, recorded, and transcribed with timestamped agendas.
- A public-facing budget portal showing line-by-line district spending in real time.
- Parent and student advisory councils rotating quarterly to give fresh perspective to the board.
- Districtwide surveys conducted annually—results made public and tied to actual policy decisions.
- “Ask a Board Member” open hours each month, hosted virtually and in-person.
- Every classroom budget and building maintenance schedule visible to the community.

We can do this. We must do this.

And compared to the cost of continued disconnection? The price is a bargain.

The Cost of Action vs. The Cost of Silence

Initiative	Estimated Cost	Result
Transparency software (like OpenGov or ClearGov)	\$30,000–\$60,000/year	Real-time public financial tracking
Professional-grade livestreaming and archiving system	\$15,000 startup + \$5,000/year	Increased public access
Districtwide engagement platform and participatory budget tools	\$20,000–\$40,000/year	Community ownership of decisions
Public engagement coordinator	\$75,000/year	Coordination of outreach, surveys, and response cycles

Total cost of proactive transparency and trust-building initiatives: ~\$150,000/year

That’s less than 0.1% of the Brandywine School District’s \$174 million annual budget.

Cost of inaction?

- Continued enrollment loss to charters and neighboring districts
- Increased parent dissatisfaction and community disengagement
- Potential lawsuits or crises from lack of oversight
- Diminished public trust, harder referendum passage, and weaker student outcomes

As *Harvard Kennedy School's Center for Public Leadership* states: “Trust is not a nice-to-have. It is the foundation of effective governance.”

The Path Forward: Trust Rebuilt, Potential Unlocked

We can either keep moving down the road of opacity, watching as more families opt out and more voters tune out—or we can flip the script.

If we act now—if we lead with radical transparency, intentional inclusion, and honest communication—we can restore faith not just in the system, but in one another.

This isn’t just about process. It’s about people. It’s about our kids.

Because when you trust the system, you invest in it. And when you invest in it, it grows stronger—more responsive, more equitable, and more visionary.

Let’s be the district that didn’t just talk about trust—we earned it.

Chapter 22.

Economic Impact of School Quality

It's one of the most overlooked truths in local governance: **good schools build strong economies.**

Not just someday. Not theoretically. Tangibly, measurably—right now.

Think about your own life. Would you buy a home in a district where test scores are plummeting? Where teachers are leaving, and news headlines cast a cloud over every budget meeting? Most people wouldn't. Most people don't. And as it turns out, **that hesitation has a price**—one we're already paying.

Brandywine School District is more than a place where children learn. It's an economic engine. And right now, that engine is underperforming. But it doesn't have to stay that way.

Let me take you on the journey—from where we were, to where we are, and to where we could be—**if we act now.**

Where We Were: A District That Once Drew Families In

There was a time when Brandywine was seen as a district of opportunity. A middle-class anchor in northern New Castle County. A draw for families looking for stability, safe neighborhoods, and strong public schools. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Brandywine's schools were widely respected, and enrollment reflected that.

But as other districts modernized and expanded—and charter schools and private options multiplied—Brandywine did not evolve at the same pace. Buildings aged, test scores slipped, teacher vacancies rose, and confidence waned.

And families? They left.

In the last 10 years alone, **Brandywine has lost more than 1,600 students** to charter schools and other districts—a **revenue loss of more than \$23 million annually.**

Let that sink in. Every empty seat represents lost funding. Every lost student reflects a lost vote of confidence.

What We've Done: Holding the Line—But That's Not Enough

To be clear, the district hasn't been asleep at the wheel. There have been initiatives—improved communication efforts, curriculum updates, and efforts to boost equity. Some individual schools have found innovative ways to support students and families.

But across the district, we've mostly been playing defense.

Meanwhile, **neighboring districts have gone on offense.**

- **Red Clay** invested in career pathways tied to local employers—preparing students for real jobs while lifting regional economic prospects.

- **Appoquinimink**, Delaware’s fastest-growing district, embraced rapid, data-informed growth with high-performing schools that boosted property values and drew national attention.
- Across the state line, **Lower Merion School District in Pennsylvania** made strategic investments in facilities and programs—and saw average home prices soar by 21% in five years, compared to just 6% in nearby, underperforming districts.

Where We Are Now: Stalled Potential, Shrinking Value

Let’s get specific.

- **Property values in the Brandywine School District have underperformed** compared to Red Clay and Appoquinimink over the last five years.
- A 2021 study by the Brookings Institution found that **homebuyers are willing to pay, on average, \$50 more per square foot for homes in top-ranked school districts.**
- In Brandywine, that gap is growing. In some ZIP codes—like 19810 and 19703—homeowners are seeing flattened appreciation rates. And yes, **the quality of the public schools is cited by realtors as a primary reason.**

It’s not just homebuyers. Businesses pay attention too.

Ask any economic development official: a strong public school system is a key factor in business relocation decisions. Companies want to set up shop where employees can send their kids to great schools. When that confidence isn’t there, they look elsewhere.

In 2023, a prospective tech firm exploring office space in northern New Castle County specifically asked for comparative school performance data before considering leases near Brandywine. **They chose Newark.** And so did 72 jobs.

Where We Can Be: Economic Growth Through Education

Imagine this future:

- A revitalized Brandywine School District with **rising test scores, strong teacher retention, and bold academic programs** that attract new families.
- A **5-year surge in enrollment**, bringing in an estimated **\$20 million in additional annual state and local funding.**
- A boost in home values by 10–15% districtwide—adding **hundreds of millions of dollars in local equity.**
- Local businesses partnering with schools on STEM, healthcare, and skilled trades pipelines—**feeding the regional workforce** and retaining young talent.

This isn’t fantasy. It’s already happening in places like Howard County, Maryland, and Naperville, Illinois—districts that invested in quality schools and reaped enormous economic dividends.

We can do the same. But we have to act now.

What It Will Take: Investment with Intention

To reverse the trend and ignite this economic engine, we need to:

1. **Rebuild Confidence in the District**
 - Transparent governance (see Chapter 16).
 - Data-rich communication with families, realtors, and developers.
 - Community partnerships that rebuild our district's reputation.
2. **Invest in Student Success**
 - Expanded career-tech pathways and dual enrollment.
 - High-dosage tutoring and wraparound services.
 - Modernized facilities that signal excellence.
3. **Market Our Schools—Because Quality Deserves a Spotlight**
 - A public awareness campaign, not just to families, but to the business community.
 - Realtor outreach, business development forums, and targeted digital engagement.

The Cost of Action vs. The Cost of Doing Nothing

Let's do the math.

Initiative	Estimated Cost	Economic Return
Marketing Campaign for Brandywine Schools	\$50,000/year	Increased enrollment + positive public perception
Dual Enrollment & Career Pathways Expansion	\$200,000/year	Retention of students + improved workforce alignment
School Modernization Grants Match (Capital Leverage)	\$1.5 million (over 5 years)	Facilities upgrade + community investment
Teacher Recruitment & Retention Incentives	\$300,000/year	Staff stability + student outcomes

Total 5-Year Investment: ~\$3.5 million

Potential Return:

- \$20 million in new state and local student funding
- \$200+ million in increased home equity across the district
- Attraction of new employers, job growth, and tax base expansion

Compare that to the **ongoing cost of enrollment loss and property stagnation—\$23 million per year and rising.**

The Opportunity Before Us: Changing Lives by Changing Course

Let's be clear: this isn't just about economics.
It's about potential. It's about kids.

Because every time a parent chooses another district, they're not just moving their child—they're moving their hopes. Their dreams. Their belief in what's possible.

We can turn that around.

We can be the district where people want to live, where employers want to invest, and where children are given every opportunity to thrive—not just in school, but in life.

That's the economic power of a great public education system.

We have the blueprint. We have the urgency. And with bold leadership, we can build the Brandywine that our kids—and our economy—deserve.

Chapter 23.

Student Departures from Brandywine School District Over the Last 10 Years

There's a quiet truth written into the enrollment numbers of the Brandywine School District. It doesn't shout. It doesn't demand a press release. But if you listen closely—it tells a story.

A decade ago, Brandywine stood at a crossroads. Our total enrollment hovered near 10,400 students—a figure that, on paper, remains steady even today. But beneath the surface, something deeper has been happening: families have been leaving. Not in protest. Not in a single wave. But gradually—quietly—year by year, household by household, parent by parent choosing to send their child elsewhere.

Some chose charter schools. Others, private schools. Still more opted to homeschool. And when you add it all up, we're not just talking about numbers. We're talking about more than 3,000 Brandywine-resident children—enough to fill nearly half the district's classrooms—learning somewhere else.

And then there are the stories the data hasn't caught yet.

My Nextdoor neighbors moved in about 11 years ago. They had two children, and when their first child became school-age about six years ago, they made a difficult decision—they packed up and moved to Middletown. Another couple moved in with two children of their own. Just last week, they shared with me their plans to move to Pennsylvania next year, seeking what they described as a stronger school system. We live just a half block from St. Helena's Church—a stable street with an aging population, many retired from DuPont or other local industries. There are three homes on this very block that sit empty, well-maintained but silent, after the seniors

who lived there passed on. Their families are holding onto the properties for now, but for how long?

And it's not just long-time families. A close friend of mine—a single mother raising her five-year-old while running her own thriving business—recently made the decision to homeschool. She loves this community but wasn't confident enough in what she saw in the district to enroll her daughter.

These are not isolated anecdotes. These are part of a growing, uncounted trend. And the most alarming part? The numbers to prove this won't show up for years. They're students who never entered Brandywine classrooms to begin with—who will never be recorded as having left because they were never officially enrolled.

Let me walk you through what that means—and why it matters.

The Numbers Tell the Story

Between 2014 and 2024:

- **Charter school enrollment** nearly doubled for Brandywine students, rising from about **725 in 2013–14 to over 1,150 in 2023–24**. Odyssey Charter alone more than tripled its Brandywine student count—from **113 to 323**.
- **Private school and homeschool enrollment** peaked at nearly **2,900 students in 2019–20**, and has consistently stayed above **2,400 students**, even amid public school investments and recovery from COVID-19 disruptions.
- **Homeschooling alone** saw a surge, peaking at **308** Brandywine students in 2019–20, and still standing at **256 in 2024–25**.

In total, roughly **1 in 4 Brandywine-resident students now learn outside the public school system**. That number mirrors Red Clay's 26%, but it towers over Caesar Rodney, which had just **602 students** in nonpublic settings last year.

Why Are Families Leaving?

Some left for academic programs that felt more tailored. Others, for environments they believed were safer or more disciplined. And yes, recent incidents—including a **2024 criminal scandal involving district staff**—shook public trust.

But behind the headlines is a broader question: are we doing enough to inspire families to *stay*?

Because let's be honest—families want to love their local schools. They want their kids to walk to class with neighborhood friends. But that loyalty depends on one thing: confidence. Confidence in our classrooms. Confidence in our leadership. Confidence that their child will be known, challenged, and safe.

The Cost of Doing Nothing

Each child who leaves our district takes not just their backpack—but also their state and local funding.

Where It Comes From:

1. State Funding (Delaware Department of Education)

Delaware allocates unit-based funding (teacher units, specialists, etc.) based on enrollment, plus per-student categorical funds (e.g., for low-income, English learners, special education).

- For FY2023–24, state base funding per pupil was approximately **\$6,000–\$7,000**, depending on grade level and need.

2. Local Funding (Brandywine School District property tax revenue)

Local funding varies by district, based on property wealth and voter-approved referenda.

- In Brandywine, local sources typically contribute an additional **\$6,000–\$8,000** per student.

3. Federal Funding (Title I, IDEA, etc.)

This varies by need, but federal funds generally add **\$500–\$1,000** per student for most districts.

Total Estimated Funding Per Student in Brandywine School District:

- **State:** ~\$6,000–\$7,000
 - **Local:** ~\$6,000–\$8,000
 - **Federal:** ~\$500–\$1,000
- **Total:** ~\$12,500–\$16,000 per student (though rounded to **\$10,000–\$15,000** in communications for simplicity)

Confirmed by Brandywine’s Budget:

According to the **Brandywine School District FY2025 budget**, the **general operating budget is approximately \$257.7 million** for an estimated **10,349 students**, resulting in a **per-pupil cost of \$24,901**. This number includes all district costs—administration, transportation, maintenance, special education, etc.—so when a student leaves, not all those fixed costs disappear.

However, the portion that *does* follow the student (typically **state and local variable funding**, including teacher unit value) is **conservatively estimated between \$10,000–\$15,000** per student.

Why It Matters:

Each time a student leaves for a charter, private, or homeschool setting, Brandywine:

- **Loses funding** that is redirected elsewhere (especially with charters, which receive public dollars).
- **Retains fixed costs**, meaning fewer resources are available for remaining students unless adjustments are made.

What We've Done—And What Comes Next

We've seen small signs of progress. Brandywine has maintained a **net gain in school choice transfers**, pulling in **599 students and losing 245** in 2023–24—a net gain of 354. That tells me there's still appeal. Still hope.

But hope is not a plan. We need a five-year strategy rooted in urgency and vision:

Year 1: Rebuild Trust and Communication

- Launch a districtwide family feedback initiative
- Publicly address the 2024 incident and steps taken to ensure safety and accountability
- Promote what's working—like our nationally recognized music programs and AP course offerings

Year 2: Expand Signature Programs

- Create magnet academies in STEM, performing arts, and career pathways
- Partner with local industries for apprenticeships and internships
- Build a “Brandywine Advantage” brand that families can believe in

Year 3: Make Every School a School of Choice

- Reimagine middle schools as innovation hubs
- Offer dual-language immersion and coding tracks
- Support students with exceptionalities through specialized resources

Years 4–5: Restore Enrollment, Reinvest in Excellence

- Win back 300+ students, bringing in an estimated **\$3.5–\$4 million** in annual funding
- Use these dollars for technology upgrades, lab renovations, and instructional support
- Show measurable academic gains—and tell our success story proudly

If We Act Now

We could change the trajectory for hundreds of kids—kids who might otherwise drift to another zip code or learning environment. We could turn Brandywine into a model of renewal, not retreat.

We could show the rest of Delaware—and districts across the country—what it looks like when a community decides that public education isn't something we inherit, but something we *build*.

That's what's at stake in this election.

Not just enrollment.

But belief.

Belief that Brandywine's best days aren't behind us—they're right in front of us.

If we act now.

Chapter 24:

Implementation Timeline – Years 1–5

“Where We Were, What We've Done, Where We Are—and What Comes Next”

Let me tell you a story about a district at a crossroads.

Once, not so long ago, Brandywine School District stood as one of the most sought-after districts in Delaware. People moved here because they wanted their children to attend our schools. Our neighborhoods were full of families who trusted Brandywine School District to deliver opportunity, safety, and a strong foundation. We were known for our teachers, our arts programs, our community spirit.

But then something changed. Not overnight—but gradually, persistently. And if we're being honest, painfully.

We lost over 3,000 students in the last decade—some to charter schools, others to private schools or homeschooling, and some families never enrolled their children in the first place. In 2014, Brandywine School District reported roughly 725 students attending charter schools. By 2024, that number exceeded 1,150. Another 2,400–2,900 Brandywine School District-resident students chose private or homeschool options during those years. The reasons vary, but the trend is unmistakable. Families stopped believing we were the best option.

We have to ask: what's the cost of that? Not just in dollars, though the loss in per-pupil funding—over \$24,900 per student per year—adds up quickly. Multiply that by 3,000 students, and we're looking at a loss of more than **\$74 million** a year in operating revenue that could have supported our schools, improved our offerings, and reduced class sizes.

But the true cost? That's harder to quantify. It's the cost of shrinking confidence, missed potential, and the narrowing of childhood horizons. It's what happens when we lose the trust of parents, the enthusiasm of educators, and the belief that our schools are where futures are built.

And yet—here's the thing. It doesn't have to stay this way.

Where We Are Now

We are at an inflection point.

Our FY2025 operating budget is \$257.7 million. We're spending **\$24,901 per student**, more than the Delaware average and well above the national average of approximately \$15,633 (NCES, 2022). That figure reflects our commitment—but it also raises expectations. Families want to know: what are we getting for that investment?

Test scores are stagnant. AP participation has declined. Enrollment continues to drop. Teacher morale is strained. Buildings need repairs. Parents, especially young ones, are voting with their feet—and leaving.

This isn't a story about blame. It's a story about responsibility. And about what comes next.

What We've Done—And What We've Learned

Over the last few years, we've taken steps—but not always in a coordinated way. We've tried new programs. We've restructured schools. We've worked to modernize technology, address equity, and improve access. We've done the best we could within the systems we had.

But let's be honest: piecemeal doesn't work. Not anymore.

We need a comprehensive, five-year roadmap—and we need to follow it with urgency, courage, and accountability.

The Implementation Timeline: Years 1–5

Year 1: Rebuilding Trust & Laying the Groundwork

- **Launch a district-wide listening campaign** with parents, teachers, students, and community leaders.
- **Audit academic programs, curriculum alignment, technology infrastructure**, and facility maintenance.
- **Reform school board governance**: implement transparency tools like livestreamed meetings, dashboards, and quarterly community reports.
- Begin **student retention and re-enrollment campaigns**, especially targeting families who left or are considering leaving.

Year 2: Academic Renewal and Student Engagement

- **Modernize curriculum and expand Career & Technical Education (CTE)** pathways in partnership with local unions and businesses.
- Establish **Innovation Labs** in every middle and high school.
- **Restructure after-school programs** and tutoring with measurable outcomes.

- Expand **AP access, early college programs, and dual enrollment**, targeting historically underrepresented students.

Year 3: Teacher Support and Workforce Investment

- Begin **teacher pay reform benchmarking** against top-paying districts like Appoquinimink and Cape Henlopen—and neighboring states like Pennsylvania and Maryland.
- Launch a **Brandywine School District Educator Fellowship** for professional development and mentoring.
- Implement a **mental health and wellness initiative** for staff and students.
- Create pipelines with local universities for future teachers, prioritizing diverse candidates and hard-to-staff areas.

Year 4: Facility Modernization and Community Integration

- **Capital improvement planning** without increasing taxes by leveraging federal and state grants, impact fees, and cost-saving innovations.
- Establish **community schools** in high-need areas with wraparound services: health clinics, job training, food security programs.
- Expand **arts and enrichment partnerships** with local cultural institutions.

Year 5: Results, Review, and Reinvestment

- Publish a “**State of the Schools**” **report card**, comparing Brandywine School District with the state’s best—and with national benchmarks.
- **Revisit enrollment zones**, evaluate class sizes, and assess the impact of innovation on student achievement.
- Launch a **second five-year strategic plan**, incorporating real-time data and community feedback.

What’s Possible If We Act Now

We can change lives.

If we follow this plan—with urgency, not excuses—then five years from now:

- Families will move *into* Brandywine School District, not out.
- Students will graduate not just with diplomas—but with college credits, trade certifications, or entrepreneurial experience.
- Teachers will choose to stay—and young people will dream of teaching here.
- Community trust will be restored because they’ll see results.

We’ll become a model not just for Delaware, but for the nation—a district that turned the tide, didn’t run from hard truths, and rose stronger because of it.

The Cost of Inaction

But if we don't act—if we keep tinkering instead of transforming—then the exodus will continue. Trust will erode. The costs will rise. Empty desks will mean lost dollars. Our teachers will leave for higher pay. Our kids will miss out—not because they lacked potential, but because we lacked vision.

A Final Word

We know what works.

We've seen it in other districts—like Howard County, Maryland, where student-centered planning drove gains in graduation and college acceptance. We've seen it in forward-thinking districts like Cherry Hill, New Jersey, where transparency and equity walk hand in hand.

The only question is: will we have the courage to act?
I believe we will.

This is our moment—not just to patch the cracks, but to build something bold and lasting. For our kids. For our teachers. For our future.

Let's begin.

Chapter 25.

Scorecards and Success Metrics: Turning Data into Opportunity

Where We Were: Data-Rich, Direction-Poor

For too long, Brandywine School District (Brandywine School District) has been surrounded by data, but not always guided by it. We've had annual reports, test scores, budget breakdowns, and state-mandated metrics. But like puzzle pieces in a drawer, they've remained unassembled—scattered facts without a clear picture.

What we lacked was a living, breathing system of **scorecards and success metrics** tied directly to *student outcomes, community trust, and strategic decision-making*. Without benchmarks that matter to families—graduation rates, career readiness, reading proficiency by 3rd grade, or the rate of chronic absenteeism—it's been difficult to measure progress in a way that's meaningful and visible.

We also lacked consistent follow-through. A glossy improvement plan might debut in Year 1, but without real accountability and checkpoints, it fades by Year 3.

What We've Done: Laying the Foundation

The district has taken important first steps. The FY2025 Operating Budget includes **goal-aligned funding** and increased transparency in line-item allocations. There's been movement toward better **dashboard reporting** on student progress, particularly around literacy and math proficiency. And some schools have piloted performance frameworks that track progress against school-level goals.

But that's not enough. Scorecards must go beyond internal audits. They must empower families, educators, and community stakeholders to **see clearly what's working—and what isn't**.

Where We Are: A Crossroads of Clarity or Crisis

Here's where we stand today:

- **Student Proficiency:** Only **42%** of Brandywine School District students meet grade-level expectations in English Language Arts (ELA) and **32% in Math** (Delaware DOE, 2023). That's below state averages and far behind districts like Appoquinimink or Cape Henlopen.
- **Graduation Rate:** Brandywine School District's rate has hovered around **85%**, close to the state average but below the national public school average of **88%** (NCES, 2022).
- **Chronic Absenteeism:** Roughly **26%** of students missed 10% or more of school days in 2023.
- **Parent Satisfaction:** No current scorecard tracks this district-wide, yet anecdotally, families are voting with their feet—leaving the district for charters, privates, or homeschooling.

These are not just numbers. They are signals. Indicators. Warnings. Or opportunities—if we listen.

Where We Can Be in 5 Years: Real-Time Results, Life-Changing Impact

Imagine this:

- A parent logs into the Brandywine School District parent portal and sees not just attendance and grades—but a **dashboard that tracks student growth over time**, with insights tailored to that child's needs.
- Teachers receive weekly reports that show not just raw test data, but trendlines, resource gaps, and smart suggestions powered by AI.
- The school board evaluates every policy and budget vote against a **public-facing scorecard** with measurable KPIs: Are we moving the needle on literacy? Have we closed the digital divide? Are more students graduating with industry credentials or college acceptances?

By **Year 3**, we can establish:

- District-wide academic benchmarks by grade and school.
- “Readiness Indexes” for college, career, and technical pathways.
- Community Satisfaction Ratings and Staff Climate Surveys.
- Transparent spending-to-outcomes analysis—dollars that show results.

By **Year 5**, we could achieve:

- **ELA proficiency at 60% or higher, Math at 50%+**, matching top-performing Delaware districts.
- **Chronic absenteeism reduced by 40%**.
- Brandywine School District positioned as a statewide leader in **real-time academic performance tracking**.
- A national case study in **public education turnaround without raising taxes**—built on transparency, innovation, and community trust.

The Cost If We Act vs. The Cost If We Don’t

Let’s be honest: It’s not cost that’s been holding us back—it’s **clarity** and **courage**.

Cost of Action:

- Software for performance dashboards: approx. **\$150,000–\$250,000** in Year 1.
- Staff training and implementation: **\$100,000**.
- Data analysts and parent engagement tools: **\$200,000 annually**.

That’s less than 0.2% of Brandywine School District’s **\$257.7 million** annual operating budget.

Cost of Inaction:

- Thousands of students leaving the district: Each lost student equals approx. **\$24,901** in lost funding annually.
- Continued underperformance and declining enrollment could cost **millions in state/federal aid** and reduce public trust irreparably.
- The longer we wait, the more students fall behind—and fewer families return.

Comparisons that Matter

- **Appoquinimink** uses real-time dashboards and has 3rd grade literacy rates approaching **70%**.
- **Red Clay** has begun to roll out career-ready credential tracking with local business partners.
- **Howard County, MD**, and **Chapel Hill, NC**, districts with similar demographics to Brandywine School District, maintain parent-facing “Equity Scorecards” updated quarterly, guiding public engagement and funding allocations.

We don’t need to reinvent the wheel. We need to put the wheels in motion.

What Works, What Doesn't

What Works:

- Data that's *visual, timely, and actionable*.
- Public scorecards aligned with strategic planning.
- Metrics tied to student success, not just adult compliance.
- Community input in designing the dashboard—parents know what they want to track.

What Doesn't Work:

- Burying data in 500-page PDFs.
- Announcing goals without measuring progress.
- One-size-fits-all test scores with no local relevance.
- Scorecards that are internal-only and never reach the people who matter: families.

The Bigger Story: What This Means for Kid

When we track the right metrics, we send a message to students: *We see you. We believe in your potential. And we're investing in your future, every single day.*

We create momentum. When a second grader sees their reading progress charted and celebrated, they don't just learn—they soar. When a high school senior sees college and workforce readiness on their transcript, doors open. When families see the results of their tax dollars in student success, trust is rebuilt.

This isn't about numbers. It's about **narratives**. About rewriting the story of Brandywine schools from “falling behind” to “leading the way.”

If We Act Now...

We can transform how Brandywine measures progress. We can connect dollars to outcomes, and policies to impact. We can turn data into direction and dashboards into dreams.

If we wait, we risk watching another generation slip through the cracks—unseen, unmeasured, unprepared.

Let's stop reacting to yesterday's failures and start building tomorrow's success.

Let's lead—with metrics that matter, and a mission that delivers.

Chapter 26.

Financial Overview: Spending vs. Outcomes

Implementation Timeline: Years 1–5

Let me tell you a story—not about balance sheets and bottom lines—but about children, potential, and the power of the right investment at the right time.

Where We Were

The Brandywine School District once stood as a model of excellence—its schools filled with the children of scientists, skilled tradesmen, and middle-class families who believed that public education was the gateway to opportunity. We had stable enrollment, strong test scores, and a deep sense of community pride. Back then, spending and outcomes moved in lockstep. A dollar in meant something measurable came out: higher literacy, college admissions, robust music programs, thriving extracurriculars, and confident graduates ready for whatever came next.

But over the past two decades, we’ve lost our way. The world changed, and we didn’t change fast enough. While other districts retooled for the future, we lagged behind. Families left—not just our schools, but our neighborhoods. Enrollment declined, yet costs rose. And the returns? They flattened. Or worse, declined.

What We’ve Done

To the district’s credit, important steps have been taken in recent years—investments in special education, teacher training, and new buildings like the Bush Early Education Center. But the core issue remains: **we’re spending more than ever, and we’re not getting the results our children—and taxpayers—deserve.**

According to Brandywine’s FY2025 budget, we are now spending **\$24,901 per student**—significantly above the **Delaware state average of \$18,200** and well above the **national average of \$15,633**, as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics. This ranks Brandywine among the highest-spending districts in the region.

Yet outcomes haven’t kept pace. Consider:

- Brandywine’s average standardized test scores in ELA and math are **below** the state average.
- Only **58% of Brandywine School District students** are proficient in English Language Arts (vs. 67% statewide).
- Advanced Placement participation has declined over the past five years.
- Thousands of students who could be attending Brandywine School District schools are opting out. We’ve lost more than **3,000 students** over the last decade to charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling.

This isn't just a budget issue. It's a **trust issue**. Families are voting with their feet.

Where We Are Right Now

We are at a tipping point. The money is there. The talent is there. The need is urgent. But we're out of alignment—misaligned on priorities, on spending strategy, and most importantly, on outcomes.

This is not a question of “do we care?” It's a question of **do we know what works?** And are we willing to do it—even if it means making hard choices?

Here's the truth: It's not how much we spend. It's **how well we spend it.**

What Works—and What Doesn't

Across Delaware and the nation, the highest-performing school systems share common traits:

- **Transparent, data-driven budgeting** tied directly to outcomes.
- **Early intervention** in reading and math, especially K–3.
- **Increased instructional time**—through tutoring, extended day/year programs.
- **Strong school leadership** and professional development for teachers.
- **Family engagement** rooted in trust, not token outreach.
- **Accountability**—clear scorecards tracking how every dollar connects to student achievement.

Brandywine, despite high per-pupil investment, hasn't yet adopted this performance-based budgeting model. There's too much inertia. Too many silos. Too little urgency.

Compare us to **Appoquinimink**, where per-student spending is lower, but graduation rates are higher. Or **Red Clay**, where investments in STEM and career pathways have yielded stronger college and workforce readiness indicators.

Look at **Howard County, Maryland**, or **Montgomery County**, where targeted investments in early childhood education, social-emotional supports, and teacher pay have led to measurable, sustainable improvements in outcomes—without constant budget crises.

What It Costs If We Act

If we restructure spending priorities without raising taxes, here's what we can do over the next 5 years:

- Shift **\$25 million** toward direct instructional support—especially early literacy, math intervention, and tutoring.
- Reallocate **\$5 million** from administrative redundancies and outside consultants toward classroom technology and modern labs.
- Implement **real-time public dashboards** linking spending to student progress.
- Launch an **academic return-on-investment (ROI) framework**—ensuring every program we fund improves outcomes, or it's reformed or sunset.

This is achievable. And it sends a clear message: *Every dollar has a job to do—and that job is improving kids' lives.*

What It Costs If We Don't

If we do nothing, we risk:

- Further enrollment decline—dropping below 9,000 students in five years.
- Increasing fixed costs per pupil—worsening budget pressures.
- Greater disparity in outcomes, especially for vulnerable students.
- Declining community trust and a weakening tax base.
- An exodus of teachers and staff to better-resourced, better-managed districts.

And most of all: **we will fail our kids.**

We will rob them of their potential—not because we didn't care, but because we didn't act.

Where We Can Be in Five Years—and Beyond

Now imagine this:

A Brandywine School District where third graders read on grade level at 95%. Where we've cut chronic absenteeism in half. Where students in every school have access to a STEM lab, a skilled counselor, and a clear path to college or a trade.

Where families return—because they see results.

Where our schools become the reason people move **into** our district—not out of it.

Where we've restored the promise of public education—not by spending more, but by spending smarter.

That's the Brandywine I believe in. That's the Brandywine we can build—if we act now.

Implementation Timeline: Years 1–5

Year 1:

- Conduct full performance audit of all programs and spending.
- Launch public financial transparency dashboard.
- Identify immediate savings to redirect to classroom supports.

Year 2:

- Begin ROI budgeting framework.
- Pilot academic recovery zones at low-performing schools.

- Increase instructional time and tutoring support.

Year 3:

- Expand career and technical education (CTE) programs.
- Invest in tech infrastructure upgrades and STEM curriculum.
- Publish annual spending-to-outcomes reports for public review.

Year 4:

- Evaluate and scale successful academic return investments.
- Strengthen partnerships with local employers and higher education.

Year 5:

- Measure results—enrollment, proficiency, graduation, and college/workforce readiness.
- Align long-term capital and operating budgets with proven academic success indicators.

This isn't just about numbers. This is about **children's lives**. This is about restoring value to public education—where outcomes justify every dollar and every decision.

We don't need to spend more—we need to **believe more**. And we need to **do better**. For them. For all of us.

Chapter 27.

Civic Education in the United States and Brandywine Where Learning Democracy Came to Life — And What We Lost

Where We Were

There was a time when civics was the heartbeat of American education. When young people graduated high school knowing how a bill became a law, why the Constitution mattered, and how to navigate not just a ballot but a society. They understood the mechanisms of democracy and saw themselves as participants, not bystanders. That was a generation raised with purpose—and with context. Civic education wasn't an elective. It was the expectation.

But slowly, quietly, civics began to vanish from the curriculum. Social studies departments shrank. Standardized testing pressures pushed content like civics to the margins. And across the country—including right here in Brandywine—we started to raise a generation that could navigate a touchscreen better than a town hall.

The result? A civic recession.

A 2022 **Annenberg Public Policy Center** survey found that only **47% of Americans could name all three branches of government**. In 2017, that number was just **26%**. Progress? Maybe. But only **20% of eighth graders** in the U.S. scored at or above proficient in civics on the 2018 **NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress)** exam.

In Delaware, the picture is even more sobering:

- **Only 23% of students statewide met the NAEP proficiency benchmark in civics.**
- Brandywine’s civic performance is not broken out by NAEP, but based on graduation requirements and the current high school course catalog, it mirrors national trends: one semester, senior year, often taught passively—if at all.

We didn’t get here by accident. And we won’t fix it by checking a box.

What We've Done So Far

To its credit, Brandywine has *not* turned its back entirely on civic learning. Some schools have initiated mock elections. A few teachers bring in guest speakers or arrange government field trips. The district participates in **We the People** and **Project Citizen** competitions.

But these efforts have been isolated—too dependent on the passion of individual teachers. What’s missing is an aligned, district-wide civic vision that spans **kindergarten through 12th grade**—one that’s rooted in real-world engagement and not just textbook content.

Programs like dual-enrollment, AP Government, and some social justice electives offer valuable exposure—but they reach only a fraction of students. The result is a civic education system that’s fragmented, inequitable, and insufficient.

Where Learning Democracy Came to Life — And What We Lost

For seven years, as President of New Castle County Council, I had the privilege of hosting one of the most meaningful events I experienced in public office: **Student Government Day**.

It wasn’t just a photo op. It was a day that brought democracy to life.

We invited high school students from across the county to step into the roles of their elected leaders—twelve councilmembers and one Council President. I would speak with them about my real-world responsibilities, answer tough questions during a spirited Q&A, and then I’d step back and watch something extraordinary happen.

The students would prepare, debate mock legislation, and run a full council meeting—from the roll call to the final vote. Their level of preparation, insight, and passion often rivaled what I saw in real sessions. The questions they raised about land use, public safety, and the county budget

weren't just smart. They were *thoughtful*. Their arguments—often grounded in fairness, fiscal responsibility, and empathy—reminded me what government should sound like.

Some years, I thought to myself: *Before any newly elected official takes office, they should be required to go through this exercise—with these students as their mentors.*

And then, in 2024—after seven years of success—it was canceled.

We were told not enough students had signed up. Not enough interest.

I was stunned. Heartbroken, actually. Because I had seen what it sparked in those students. I knew the spark hadn't vanished. It had simply been given fewer chances to catch fire.

This is why civic education can't be optional—or occasional. It must be embedded, year-round, in every student's experience. Because when students are given a seat at the table—even a mock one—they rise to the occasion. They show us what democracy can be when we invest in it early.

If we want informed, engaged citizens tomorrow, we must bring them into the process today

Where We Are Right Now

Let's be honest: Our students can graduate without ever understanding how a school board works, what a state senator does, a county executive, a council president or how to speak at a public meeting. They can pass through 13 years of school without ever learning to decipher a media source, engage in civil debate, or register to vote.

And they're noticing.

In focus groups, Brandywine high school students have said:

“We don't learn how to actually be part of society.”

“I don't know what to do after voting. That's all we're taught.”

“Why do we take so many classes we'll never use, but never learn how to advocate for ourselves?”

These kids aren't disengaged—they're just underprepared. And it shows: Youth voter turnout in Delaware hovers around **31%**—far below what's needed to sustain a healthy democracy.

The Cost of Doing Nothing

If we don't act, we'll continue to graduate students who are politically disengaged, socially disconnected, and civically uninformed.

The long-term cost?

- A less participatory electorate

- A more polarized society
- Communities less equipped to solve problems
- Generations of Delawareans with muted voices in their own democracy

In short: we risk raising children who don't know their power.

What We Can Do

We don't need to start from scratch—we need to **lead**.

Here's the plan for Brandywine:

1. Build a K–12 Civic Engagement Pathway

- Integrate civics into **elementary reading and social studies**, focusing on community, responsibility, and empathy.
- In **middle school**, introduce simulations—mock trials, school government, media literacy labs.
- In **high school**, embed project-based civic learning—students will **identify a community issue, research it, and propose a policy solution**.

2. Launch a “Civic Fellows” Program

- Select civic-minded juniors and seniors to serve as youth advisors to the Board, sit on committees, and present community solutions.
- Provide training in public speaking, media literacy, legislative process, and local government.

3. Partner with Local Government and Media

- Create annual “**Civic Immersion Days**”: visits to the state capitol, city council chambers, and courtrooms.
- Launch a **student-run civic media channel** in partnership with WHYY or Delaware Public Media to publish youth editorials, podcasts, and issue spotlights.

4. Require a Capstone Civic Project for Graduation

- Not a test. Not a paper. A *solution*.
Students will choose a problem they care about—climate, gun safety, mental health, housing—and build a presentation for a real audience. School leaders. Lawmakers. Voters.

5. Provide Professional Development

- Train teachers in project-based civic instruction and civil discourse moderation.
- Equip every school with a “**Civic Education Toolbox**”—resources, rubrics, case studies.

What It Will Cost—and What It’s Worth

Estimated Cost to Implement Districtwide:

- Curriculum development and training: \$150,000
 - Civic Fellows stipends and events: \$50,000/year
 - Program coordination and technology: \$100,000
- Total Year 1 Cost: \$300,000 – \$350,000**
Years 2–5 Maintenance: ~\$100,000 annually

Now compare that to the **\$257.7 million general fund** Brandywine approved for FY2025. We’re talking about investing less than **0.14% of the budget** to shape the future of our democracy.

The cost of inaction? Civic apathy. Shrinking voter rolls. A rising tide of misinformation. And a generation disconnected from their community and country.

Where We Can Be in Five Years

If we act now—if we invest in civic education as the cornerstone of readiness—we can reshape the culture of public schools and public life.

Imagine Brandywine in 2030:

- Every student knows how to write a letter to a legislator—and gets a response.
- Civic Fellows help rewrite outdated policies and co-host town halls.
- Voter registration among seniors hits 90%.
- Elementary kids run kindness campaigns that make the evening news.
- Our graduates aren’t just college-ready—they’re community-ready.

We can do this. We can lead the state. And the nation will notice.

Comparisons: What Works, What Doesn’t

- **Illinois** passed a law requiring one semester of civics for high schoolers. Results? **Improved civic knowledge, discussion of current events, and media literacy** scores.
- **Massachusetts** implemented a statewide civics project requirement and saw significant gains in civic attitudes and voter registration.
- **Montgomery County, MD** uses a K–12 progression of civic competencies embedded across disciplines—not just history class.

By contrast, districts that stick to outdated textbooks and rote memorization see **flat civic engagement**, even as other student indicators rise. Civics can’t be passive. It must be **personal**.

Final Word

This is about more than government. It's about power. It's about belonging. It's about reminding every Brandywine student—no matter their background—that they have a voice and a stake in the future.

If we teach kids *how* to lead, they will.

If we show them *where* to lead, they will go farther than we ever imagined.

And if we get this right—Brandywine won't just graduate scholars.

We'll graduate citizens.

Chapter 28.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

Let me tell you a story. It's the story of a community that once believed in its schools so deeply, families bought homes here just for the ZIP code. A district where kids graduated not just with diplomas, but with direction. That was Brandywine.

But over time, something changed.

Not overnight—but gradually, imperceptibly—the numbers began to shift. More parents began choosing private, charter, and homeschool options. In the last ten years alone, **over 3,000 students** who could have been learning in Brandywine classrooms went elsewhere. Some moved. Others opted out. Their absence has cost us not just enrollment, but energy. Confidence. And yes—funding.

Where we were was proud.
Where we are now is urgent.
Where we go next is up to us.

The Problem

Right now, **Brandywine School District spends \$24,901 per student**—more than any other district in Delaware, more than most in the nation. And yet, we're seeing:

- **Declining student enrollment**
- **Inconsistent academic outcomes**
- **Lower participation in AP and advanced coursework**
- **Teacher burnout and staff shortages**
- **Loss of trust from families, evident in growing withdrawals and school-choice transfers**

Families aren't leaving because they don't care. They're leaving because they do.

We are at a crossroads—where the cost of inaction will be measured not only in dollars, but in diminished futures.

The Stakes

Let's talk about cost.

When a student leaves our district for a charter or private school, **the state funding follows them**. Over a decade, Brandywine has lost **millions of dollars**—and more than that, momentum. Every empty seat is a missed opportunity to build community, foster excellence, and fund the services all our children need.

And what happens if this continues?

We see what happens when districts falter. In cities like Chester, Pennsylvania and Camden, New Jersey—where state takeovers replaced local control, and academic performance tanked while bureaucracy ballooned. Once that trust is gone, it's almost impossible to get it back.

The Opportunity

But here's what else is true: **We can turn this around.**

We already have the bones of a strong district. We have passionate teachers. We have smart students. We have schools filled with potential. What we need now is leadership—strategic, transparent, accountable leadership.

The next five years are everything.

Here's the plan:

Year 1: Rebuild Trust and Transparency

- Launch a full, public-facing dashboard tracking academic metrics, enrollment, finances, and teacher retention
- Conduct family and staff satisfaction surveys
- Host town halls and listening sessions across every feeder pattern

Year 2: Instructional Innovation

- Launch pilot Innovation Labs in each high school—combining STEM, entrepreneurship, and creative arts
- Expand dual-enrollment and AP access, particularly for underserved students
- Establish districtwide instructional coaching for teachers

Year 3: Community-Based Support

- Launch district-run before- and after-school enrichment programs
- Partner with libraries and nonprofits to offer homework help, mentorship, and job shadowing
- Fund restorative justice and social-emotional learning initiatives

Year 4: Infrastructure & Staffing

- Modernize facilities to ensure every school is safe, clean, and technologically current
- Increase paraeducator and support staffing to reduce classroom burdens
- Build a teacher pipeline program through university partnerships

Year 5: Recruitment, Retention & Recognition

- Launch aggressive recruitment of top-tier educators and counselors
- Tie teacher compensation more directly to competitive benchmarks—especially as we trail behind states like Maryland and New Jersey in starting pay
- Spotlight and reward excellence at every level—from custodians to curriculum leads

What Works—and What Doesn't

Districts that have successfully turned around have done a few things in common:

- **Clear, measurable goals** (see: Montgomery County, MD)
- **Real community buy-in** (see: Cambridge, MA)
- **Support for teachers—not just accountability** (see: Madison, WI)
- **Innovation with equity at the center** (see: Raleigh, NC)

What doesn't work?

- **Endless reorganization with no results**
- **Top-down mandates with no classroom input**
- **Silencing community voices**
- **Overreliance on outside consultants with no accountability**

We don't need to reinvent the wheel. We just need to get behind the wheel, with a roadmap—and drive.

The Future If We Act Now

Imagine this:

A parent moves into our district and *doesn't* question their child's future. They see vibrant schools, supported teachers, high-performing classrooms, and a culture that believes every child can achieve.

A student graduates from Brandywine and walks into the world—college, trade school, career—not just prepared, but propelled.

A teacher stays. Not just for a year, but for a career.

A grandmother, whose kids went here and whose grandkids now do, feels pride that her neighborhood school still shines.

That is the Brandywine we can build together.

But none of this will happen without action.

The Call to Action

This is more than a campaign. This is a movement to **reclaim the promise of public education** in Brandywine.

If you believe in:

- Transparency that builds trust
- Investment that yields results
- Leadership that listens and acts

Then I ask for your vote—and your voice.

Let's not look back five years from now and wonder what could have been. Let's look ahead—five, ten, even twenty years—and know we were the ones who turned the tide.

Let's build the Brandywine our children deserve.

Let's get to work.