

## *Community Corner*

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Delsea Regional and Elk Township School Districts**



### ***The Last Line That Changed Everything: How One NJASA Email Sparked a \$3 Million Transformation***

Sometimes leadership is about vision. Sometimes it's about timing. And sometimes it's about reading to the end of an email.

In late 2024, I was scanning an issue of NJASA's *The Source*, as I routinely do. Buried at the very bottom—after announcements, legislative updates, and professional development opportunities—was a brief mention that would become a turning point for two school districts I have the privilege of serving. It read:

*“Funding Opportunity for Public School Districts: Opioid Recovery Trust. The Trust aims to help public school districts recover from the opioid epidemic and develop responses to enhance educating students harmed by the crisis. Districts may apply for up to \$1.5 million across three grant categories.”*

That single paragraph catalyzed what would become a multi-million dollar transformation for Elk Township and Delsea Regional school districts. Together, we successfully secured six \$500,000 grants totaling \$3 million—three for each district. The work of applying, aligning, designing, and justifying each proposal was intense and collaborative. But it all began with a line I could have easily missed.

This is more than a grant success story. It's a testament to the power of NJASA communications, the strategic readiness of school districts, and the moral imperative to act when students' well-being is at stake—especially in communities still healing from the ripple effects of the opioid epidemic.

## Elk Township: Responding to a Crisis with Systems of Support

Elk Township School District, a small rural PreK–6th grade district serving 346 students, faces disproportionate needs: 36% of students are economically disadvantaged and 40% qualify for special education or Section 504 accommodations. The opioid epidemic has only deepened these challenges—manifesting in trauma, family instability, and an overreliance on special education as a behavioral intervention.

We applied for—and were awarded—all three grant types.

### **1. Model Programs and Best Practices Grant: A Focus on Prevention**

With this grant, Elk will implement a proactive, evidence-based instructional coaching model designed to reduce unnecessary special education referrals. Funds will support the hiring of a full-time instructional coach and the acquisition of high-quality screeners and intervention materials. This foundational shift will help us identify academic and behavioral concerns *before* they escalate.

### **2. Innovation Grant: Community Connection as a Pathway to Healing**

The Innovation Grant funds the creation of two new roles: a Community Wellness Coordinator to serve as a family-facing connector to local resources, and a District Data Manager to integrate academic, behavioral, and social-emotional data for rapid, coordinated response. These roles will close long-standing gaps in care by ensuring that every student in need is seen—and every family has someone to turn to.

### **3. District Improvement Grant: Mental Health as Academic Infrastructure**

Finally, Elk’s District Improvement Grant funds the hiring of a licensed social worker as well as the rollout of trauma-informed training for all staff. This team will provide over 500 direct counseling sessions per year, host small group therapy sessions for children experiencing opioid-related trauma, and lead parent workshops on coping and resilience.

These three grants form a powerful triad: identify early, respond holistically, and support emotionally—all grounded in a commitment to equity and sustainability.

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## Delsea Regional: Scaling Innovation for Grades 7–12

Serving over 1,600 students across Franklin and Elk Townships, Delsea Regional School District confronts similar challenges at the secondary level. With 31% of students economically disadvantaged and 26% requiring IEPs or 504s, the academic and emotional needs of our students are complex—and growing. The same grant framework was applied, with proposals designed to ensure systemic coherence across grades and transitions.

## **1. Model Programs and Best Practices Grant: MTSS as a Unifying Framework**

Delsea will use this grant to enhance our district-wide Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), equipping educators with the tools and training to identify needs early, apply tiered interventions consistently, and reduce overclassification into special education. Instructional coaches will guide teachers in implementing interventions that are not only research-based—but responsive to our students’ lived realities.

## **2. Innovation Grant: Cross-District Continuity through a Community Wellness Manager**

Our Innovation Grant funds a Community Wellness and Data Manager who will serve as a bridge across the PreK–12 continuum. This role will oversee universal screening, coordinate supports between feeder and receiving schools, and ensure a seamless system of care that follows students throughout their educational journey. The initiative also invests in trauma-informed professional development and stakeholder collaboration to ensure systemic alignment.

## **3. District Improvement Grant: Wellness, Food Stability, and Medical Access**

Recognizing that mental and physical health are essential to learning, this grant supports a series of wraparound services: on-site counseling via partnerships with local mental health providers, food stability programming (including weekend backpack meals), and school-based medical clinics offering vaccinations and wellness checks. These services target the root causes of absenteeism, disengagement, and emotional dysregulation.

Together, these grants position Delsea not just to serve—but to **lead** in building regional systems of recovery, resilience, and readiness.

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## **What This Means for Our Students—and for NJASA**

The opioid epidemic has left no community untouched. It manifests in student trauma, caregiver loss, housing instability, and silent suffering. Our districts—like many others—had the vision to respond, the commitment to act, and the capacity to execute. But we needed a spark. We needed access. We needed information.

And that came from NJASA.

If I hadn’t read that final line in *The Source*, none of this would have happened.

That’s what makes professional associations like NJASA so vital. The newsletters, policy updates, legal alerts, and funding notices are not just helpful—they are sometimes transformative. They bring national trends to local desks. They turn unknown opportunities into multi-million-dollar strategies. They help leaders lead.

For Elk and Delsea, that last line changed everything.