

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

with purpose

MARE CONFERENCE | OCTOBER 22, 2026



Missouri
Association of
Rural Education

MARCI ORR, APR

573.721.5773

marci@centeredpr.com

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

with purpose

Town halls aren't open-mic complaint sessions. Learn a practical framework for planning and facilitating community conversations that build trust, gather meaningful feedback, and align with your strategic plan. Whether discussing school finance, budgets, or a bond issue, you'll leave with a process you can use immediately. This session is led by a Marci Orr, APR, communications director and former school board member.

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town hall





You're an influencer!

People trust *you* over institutions.



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If you think uncomfortable conversations are hard, wait until you see the results of avoiding them.



- People fill information gaps with assumptions.
- Staff hear rumors before they hear from leadership.
- Board members field questions without shared context.
- Community members feel decisions were already made.
- Trust becomes harder to rebuild.

How do we
improve
academics &
retain
teachers?

→ **How do we
sustain the
education
we are
providing?**

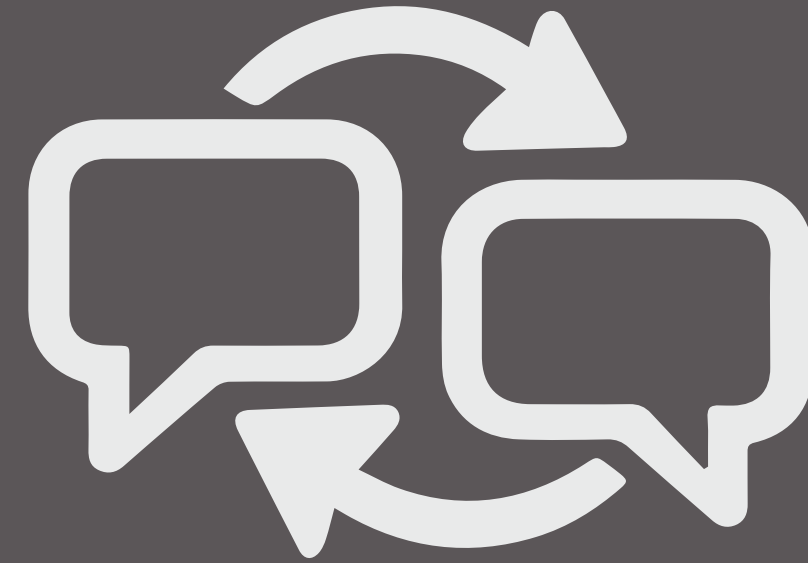
- Rising operating costs: transportation, utilities, supplies
- Increasing SPED & service costs
- Changing enrollment and birth rates
- Staffing decisions and workload concerns
- Uncertain revenues and long-term financial planning





Every financial option has a human impact, and different groups will see that impact differently.

**Financial challenges
are the number one
thing facing school
superintendents, up
33% in 2025.**



The budget conversation is now an ongoing responsibility of schools, not an occasional message to manage during bond/levy ballot issues..or a pandemic.

People can disagree with your decision without having to disagree with how you communicated it.



Four things every difficult message needs:

- What is happening?
- Why is it happening?
- What does it mean for me?
- What happens next?





**Superintendents
said that the most
important factor in
determining their
longevity in a
district was their
relationship with
their board.**

(MSBA)

Superintendents who build significant relationships with their board will gain support that will increase their capacity to successfully face challenges and lengthen their tenure.





town hall



TRADITIONAL

Presentation

Open microphone

Individual complaints

Superintendent responds

Meeting ends

PURPOSEFUL

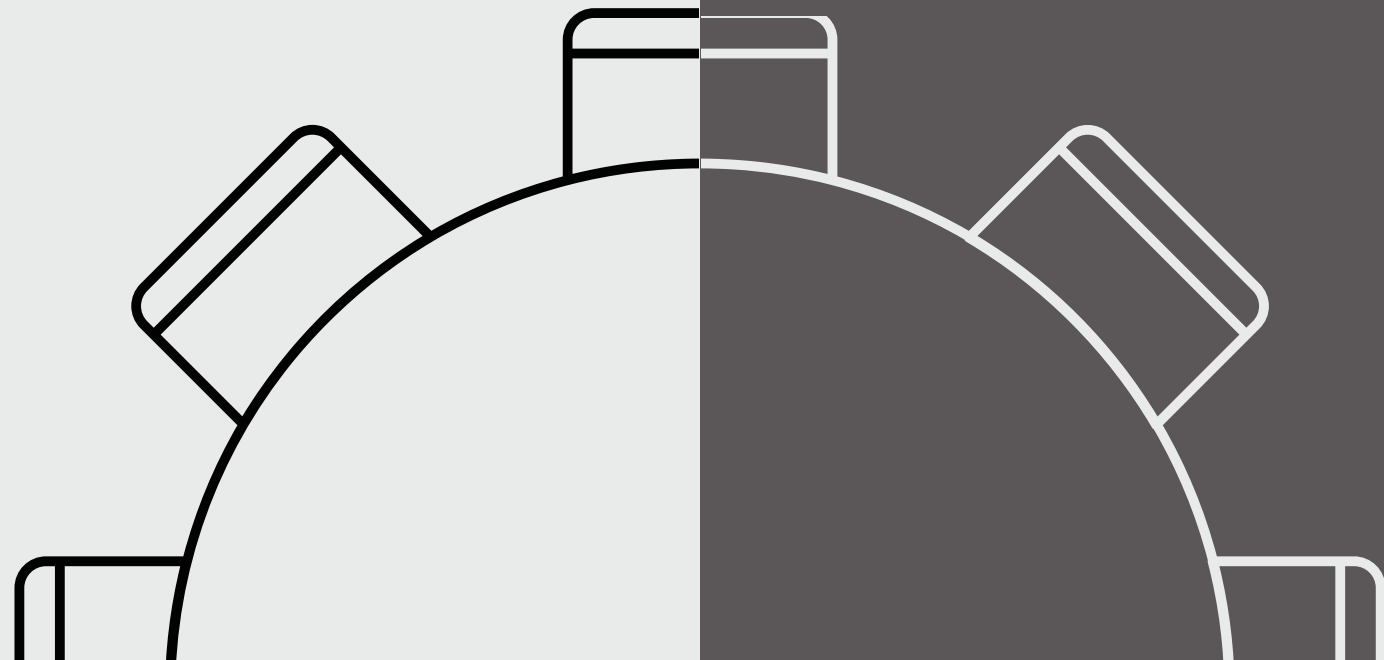
Shared information

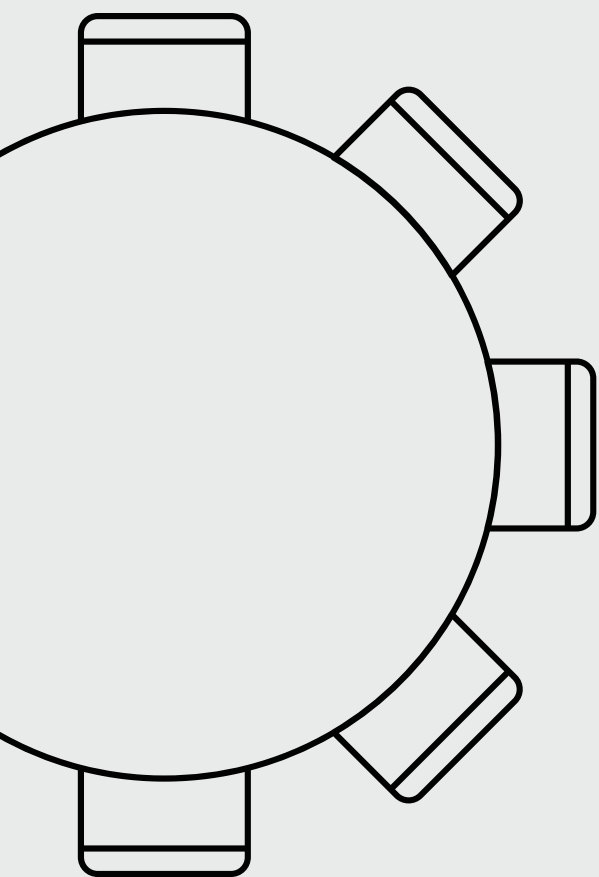
Guided questions

Small-group discussion

Documented feedback

Follow-up and action





Who do we invite?

How do we get people there?

Why do they want to come?

Board

Phone Calls

Texts

Emails

Doodle Poll

BOE Agenda

Staff Newsletter

5 Invites



Staff

District Newsletter
Building Newsletter

Lunch & Learns

Text Reminders

5 Invites

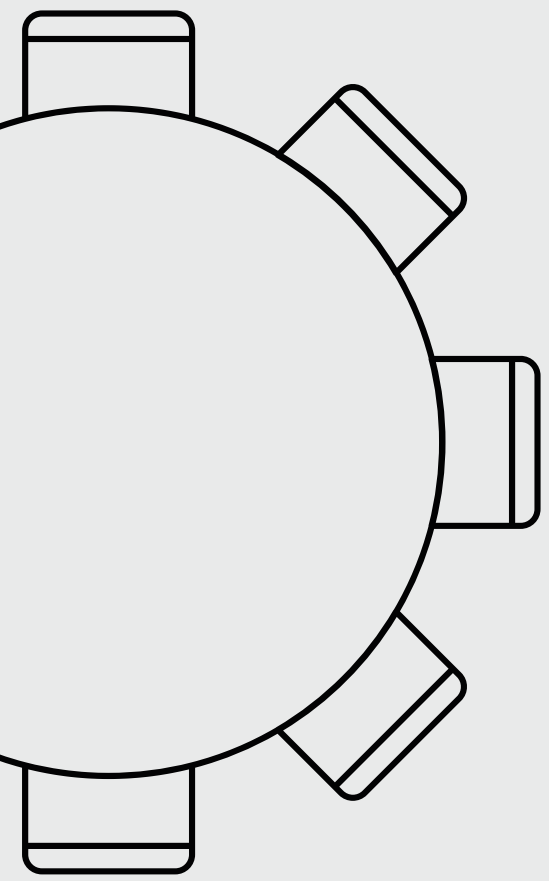


Community

District Newsletter
Chamber Newsletter
District Road Show
Social Media/FB Event

Local Media

5 Invites



What type of meeting do we want to have?

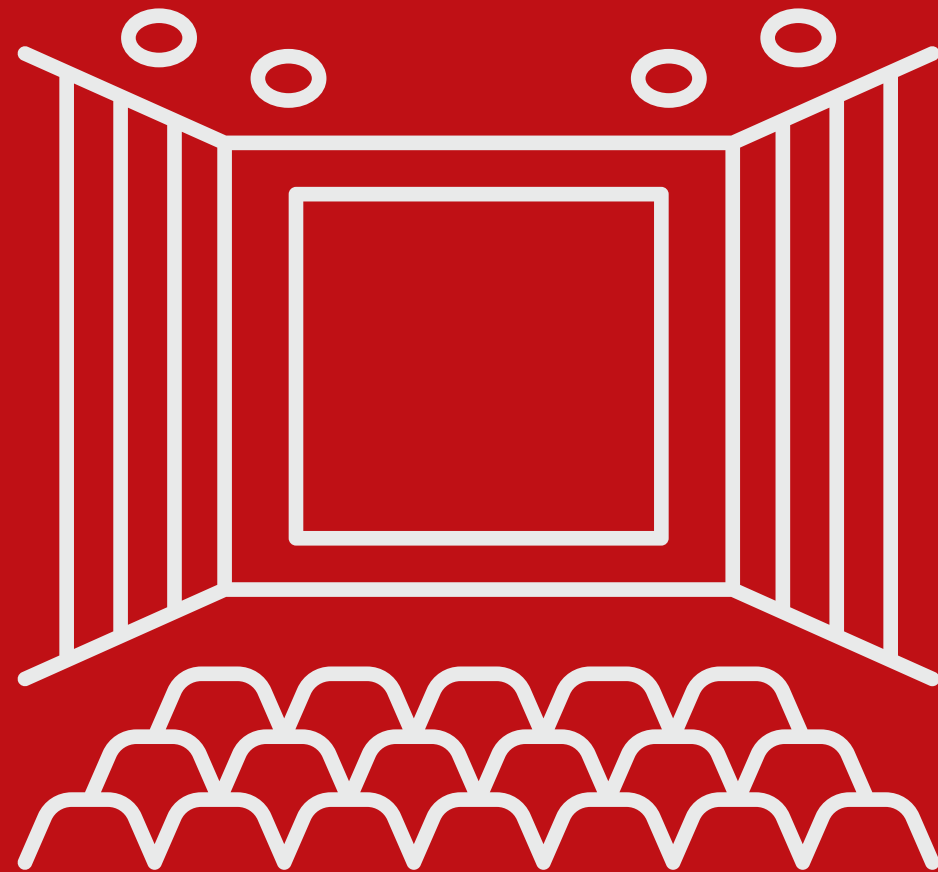
What do you hope to get out of it?

☒ Check a box?

☒ Feedback?

☒ Action?

SIT & GIT



Prepare the room.

Welcome & set expectations.

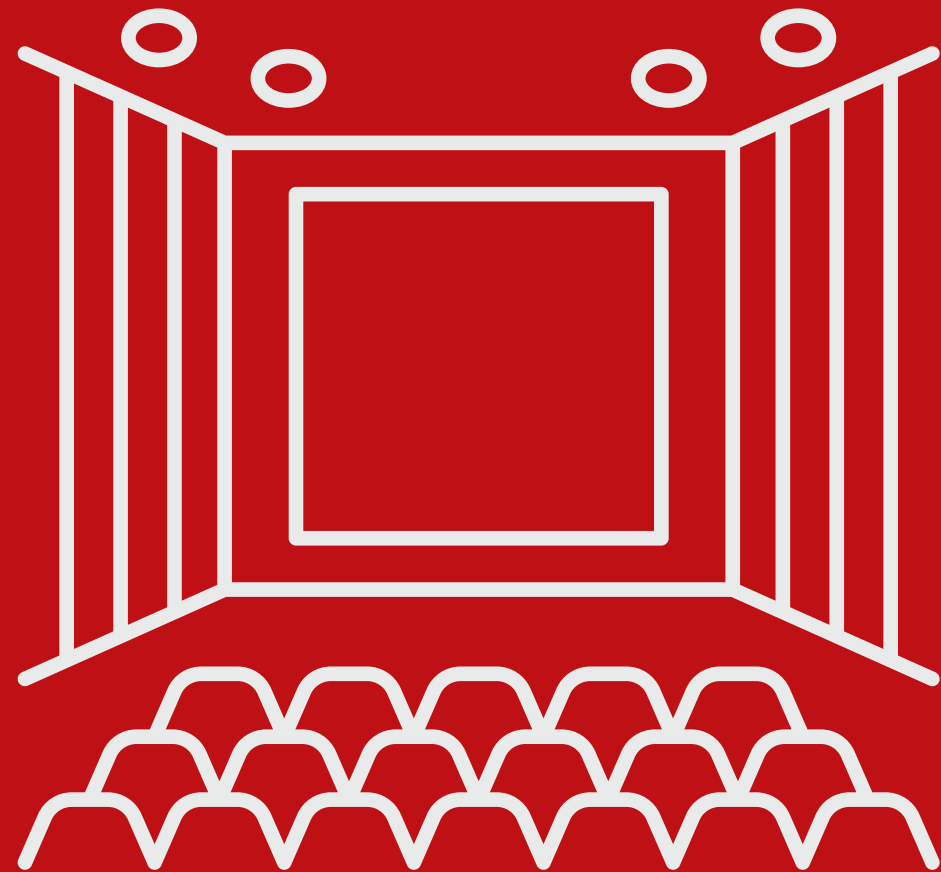
Presentation.

Q&A around the room.

QR Code for info.

Close with next steps.

SIT & GIT



What's the one question that you see asked over & over online about your school OR public schools in general?



TRAIL GAME



Prepare the room.

Welcome & set expectations.

Trail Game.

Come back together & discuss
answers. (Presentation part)

Close with next steps.

TRAIL GAME



Determine how many “stops” you want. This will be your number of questions.

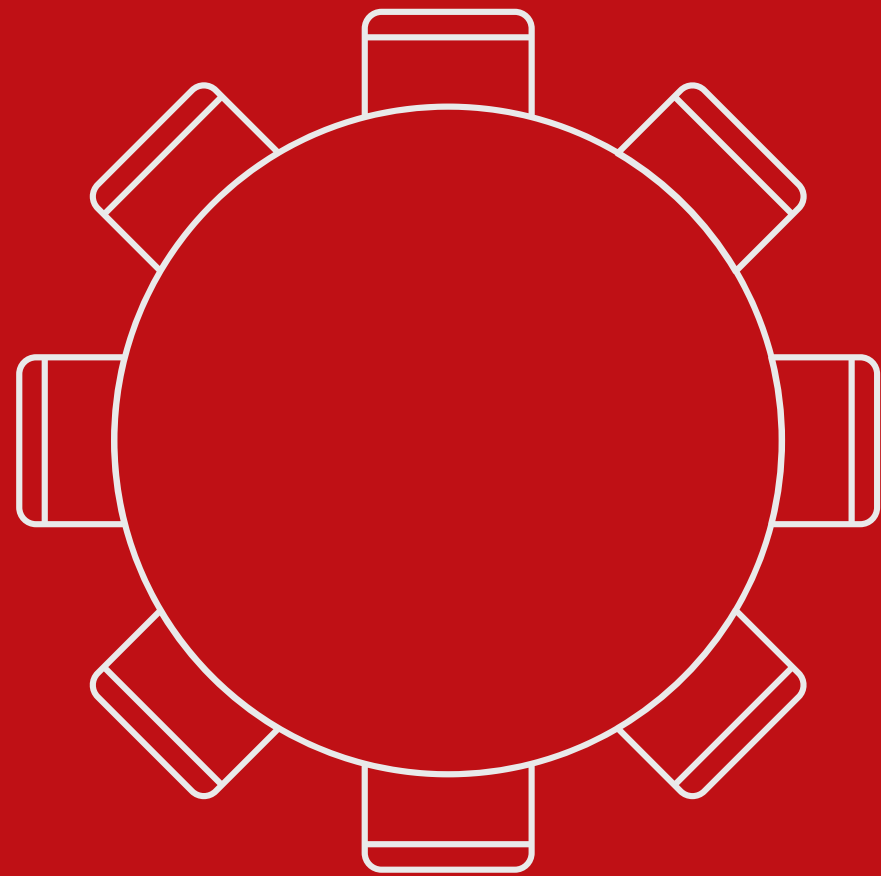
Type the questions in a google doc; make the first answer the right answer every time.

Go to AI and enter this prompt:

“Help me create a trail game for a community engagement night. I have created four questions, each question will be a stop on the "trail." The correct answer should lead the group to the next question. If they answer the questions correctly, they should all visit each question one time. Use the following four questions and answers, word for word. The first answer in each question is the correct one, but mix up the answers to create the "trail," remembering each group needs to visit each question one time. Here are the questions - [insert questions]

Note: you can also use AI to generate the questions for you. Do this first; then use the prompt.

WORLD CAFE MODEL



Prepare the room.

Welcome & set expectations.

Short Presentation.

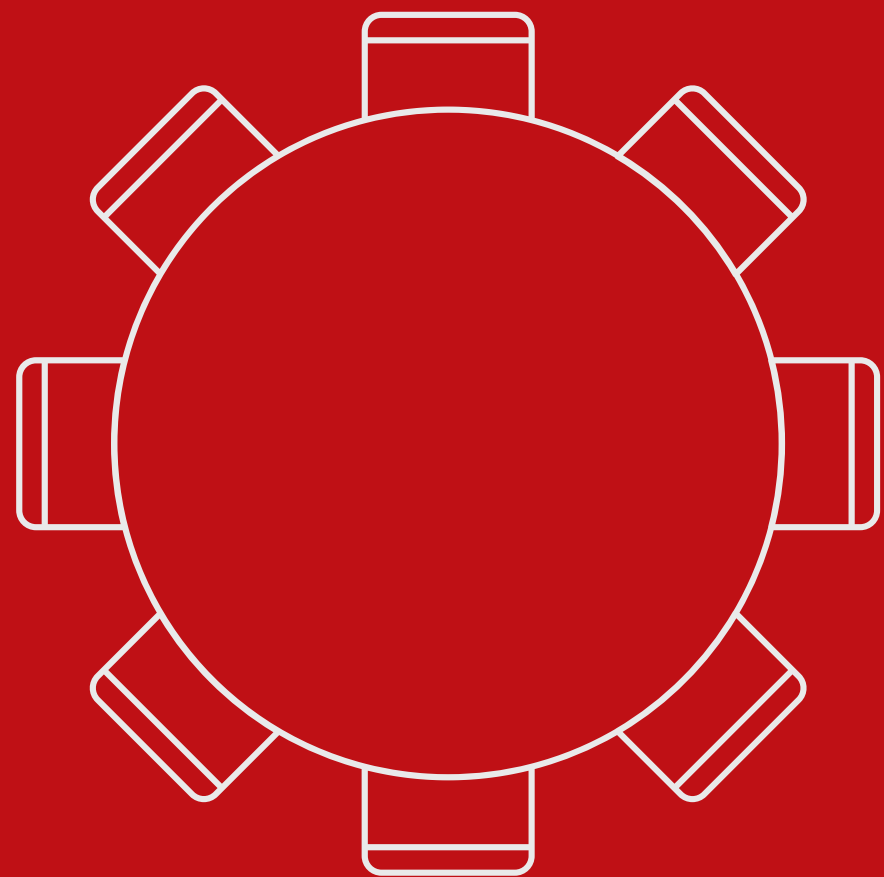
Round 1: Discuss.

Round 2: Rotate & discuss.

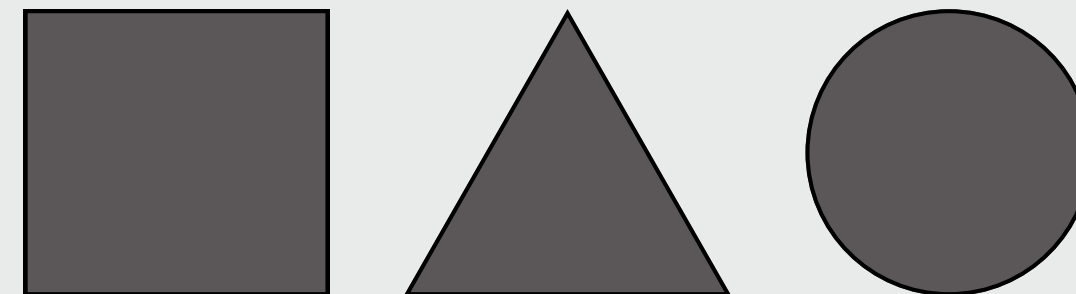
Round 3: Rotate & discuss.

Close with next steps.

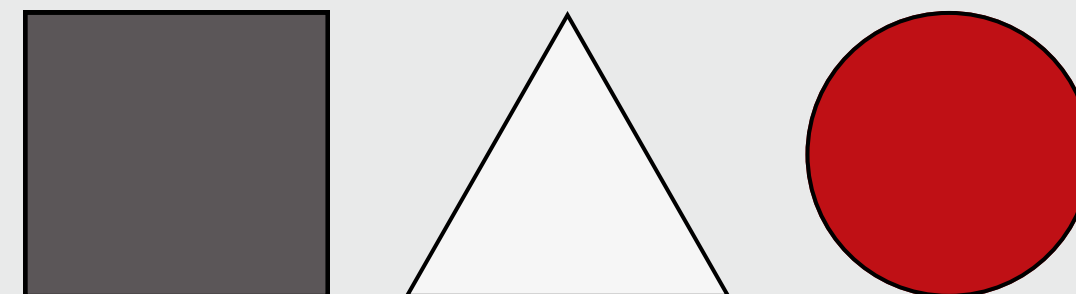
WORLD CAFE MODEL



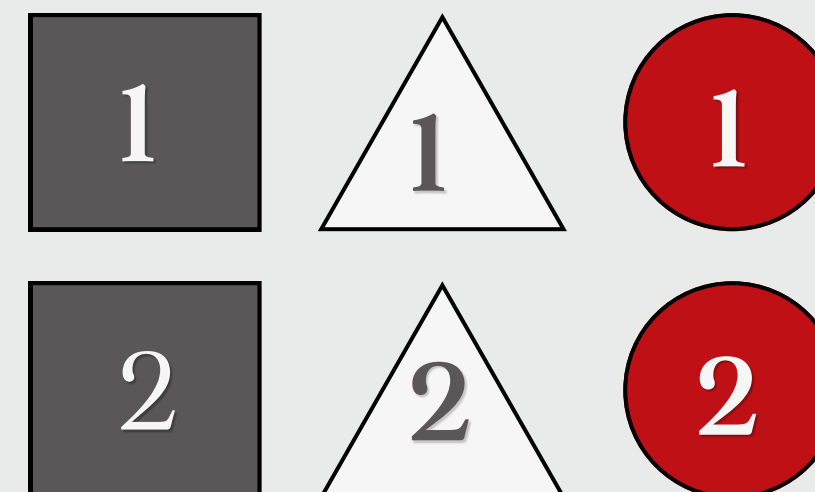
Shape.



Color.



Number.

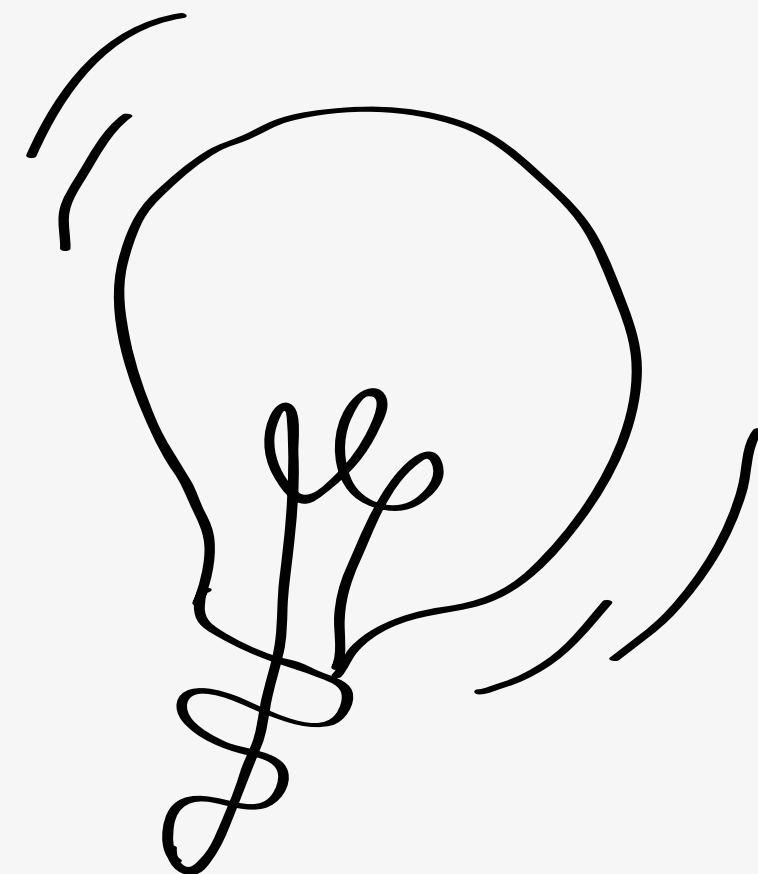




round one

What do we value?

"What programs, services, and experiences are most important for our district to protect as we plan for the future?"



Use CSIP.

Understand how staffing & schedules work.

Understand school budget/finance process.



round two

What is working?

What is considered
“successful” in your
district right now?

Students:

Literacy/Math
Graduation Rate
Graduate Celebrations
College/Career Prep
Real World Experience
Attendance

Staff:

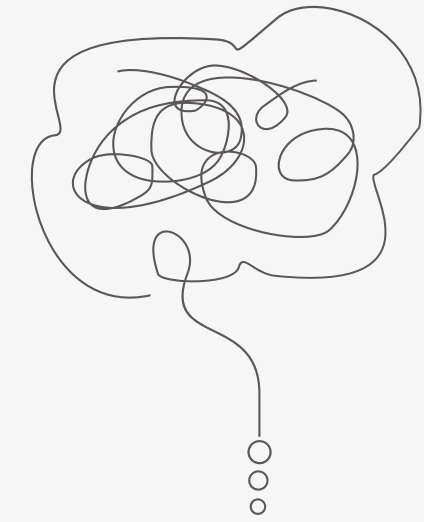
Retention rate
Years of Service
PD Focus
Awards/Accolades

*****All of this should be
evident in your district
comms***

round three

**What are you
going to hear?
Prepare for it.**

What will staff &
community members say
about your school?



Common Phrases:

**“If we didn’t pay
admin so much...”**

**“If we didn’t have so
many administrators...”**

**“Could’ve gotten raises
if we didn’t pay for
turf.”**

“Do better.”

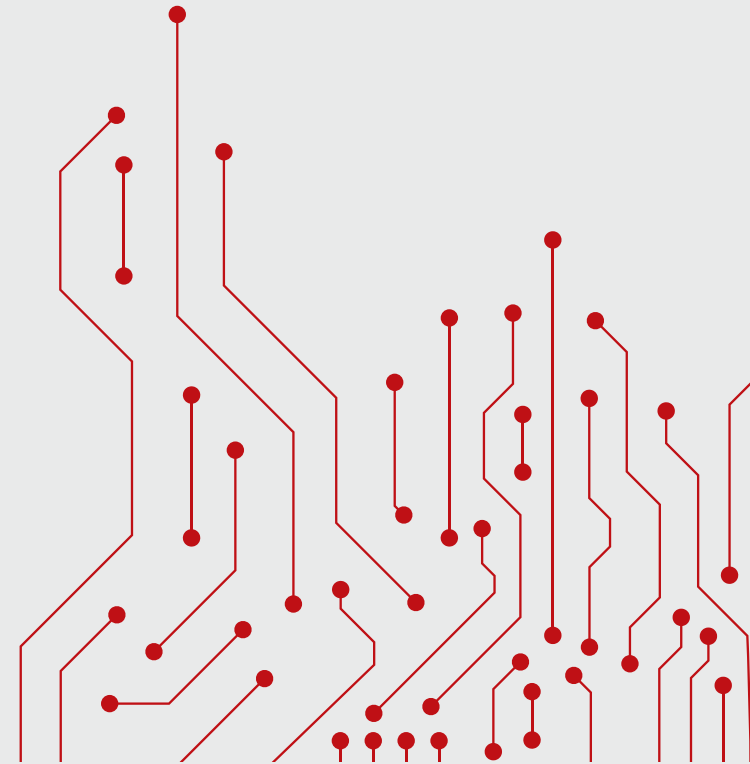
Results + Follow Up



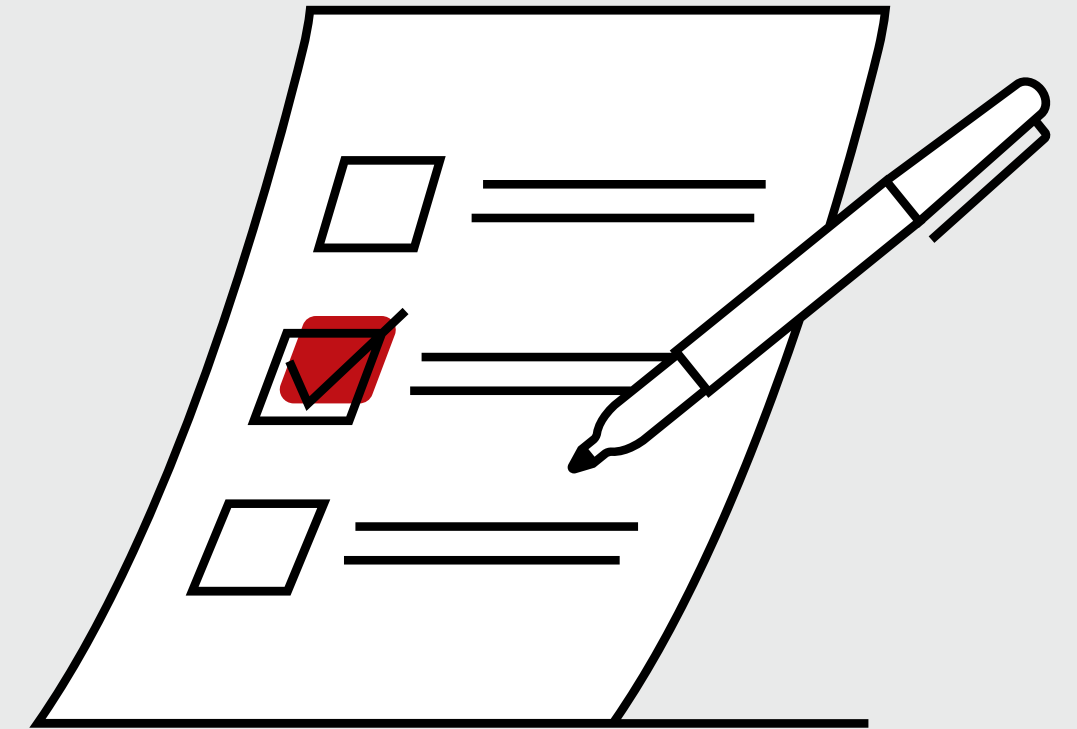
Notetakers



QR Codes



AI



Surveys



Use your communication avenues to push out, inside-out.

Tools Used

- District Communication Platform: Email/Text/Post
- Google/Microsoft Forms
- Survey Monkey
- Mentimeter
- Canva: QR Codes, Graphics
- AI Platform
- Student Manual Labor



MOSPRA HELP DESK

MARE CONFERENCE: Oct 22, 2026



The *leaders* in
Missouri school *communications*
and *public relations!*

MOSPRA
RESOURCES:



thank you.



Marci Orr, APR

573.721.5773 

marci@centeredpr.com 

LinkedIn 

Facebook 

