School Board Transparency... How Important Is It?

*Alabama **Association** of School Boards Annual Conference* 2025

GSBA
Georgia School Boards Association

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Thank you for joining us today!

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WHO ARE WE?

eBOARDsolutions is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the GSBA

eBOARDsolutions

OUR MISSION

To help boards lead and govern effectively and operate efficiently.

OUR PURPOSE

To support public education.

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By the Numbers

- GSBA has been serving school boards for 75 years!

- GSBA created Simbli, a board management system software, in 1997.

- In 2007 GSBA created eBOARDsolutions as a subsidiary.

- In 2009, Simbli became an affiliate service program of AASB.

- Currently there are 2,100+ organizations using Simbli in 28 states, including 103 school districts in Alabama.

SESSION FOCUS
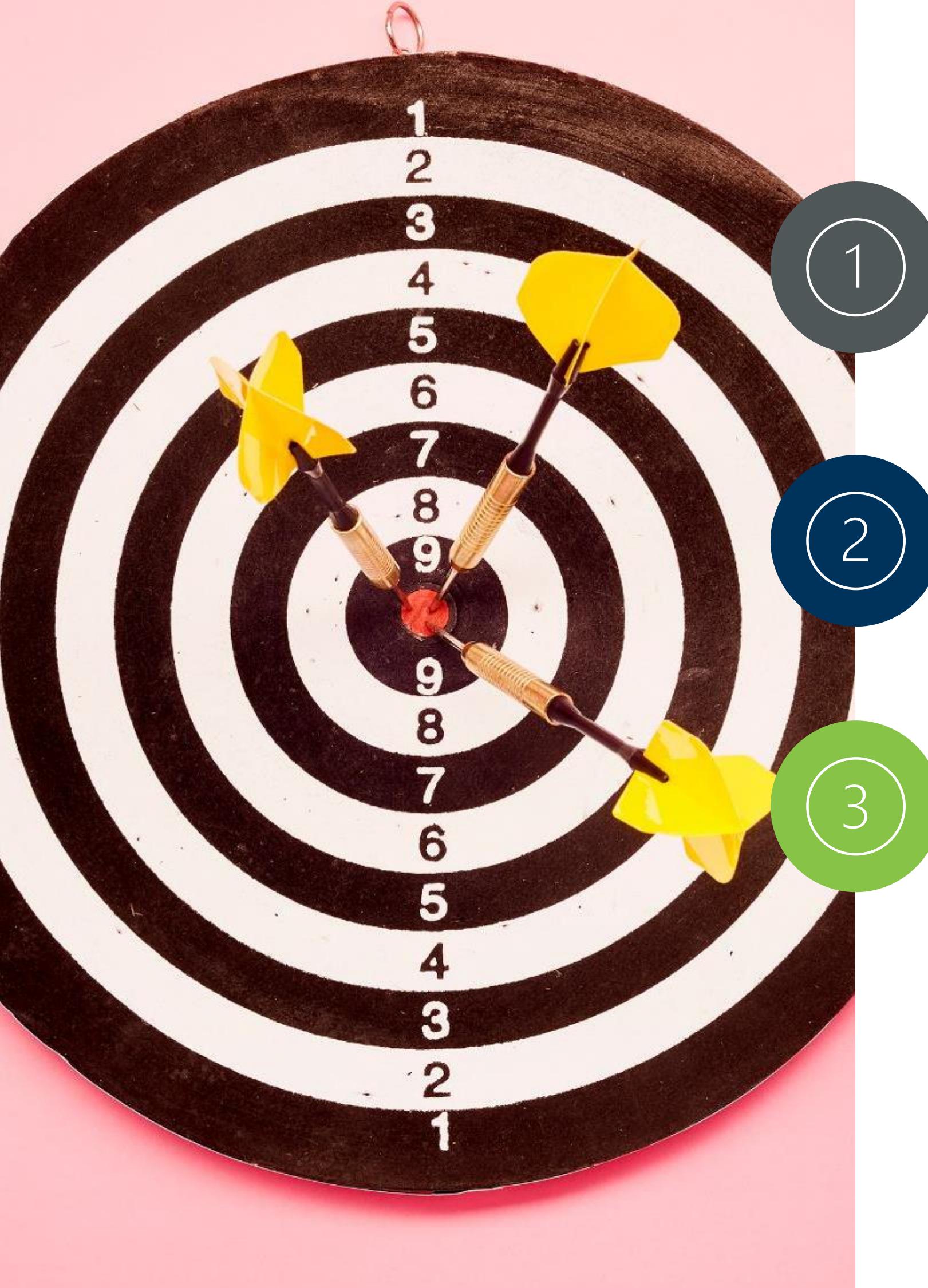
1 Gain a better understanding of the importance of transparency in governance.

2 Explore transparency as it relates to board governance.

3 Apply the concept of transparency by the use of tools in Simbli.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TRANSPARENT?

Transparent – easy to perceive or detect; open, honest, and not hiding any information or actions.

Governance Focus

The board operates in a way that allows the public to see not only what decisions are made, but how and why they are made – fostering trust, accountability, and engagement.

Governance Focus

The practice of conducting the board's work in an open, honest, and accessible manner – ensuring that decisions, processes, and rationales are clear and understandable to the community.

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REFLECTION

1. Think of a time when your community either praised or criticized your board's transparency. What specific actions or behaviors shaped that perception?

2. If a community member asked you, "How do I know our board is being transparent?" – what evidence or examples could you point to?

3. In your view, what's the biggest barrier to transparency in school board governance – and what's one step your board could take to improve it?

TRANSPARENCY

In public school governance

Foundational Principle	**Transparency builds trust.** It is the foundation of public confidence in the school board's decisions.
	When stakeholders understand *how and why* decisions are made, they are more likely to view outcomes as fair and legitimate—even if they disagree.
	"Sunlight is the best disinfectant" — openness deters misconduct and promotes accountability.
Accountability and Ethical Leadership	Transparent governance reinforces accountability to students, parents, staff, and taxpayers.
	It ensures that board members' actions align with policies, laws, and the district's mission.
	Promotes ethical leadership and responsible stewardship of public resources.
Informed and Engaged Stakeholders	Open communication empowers parents, teachers, and community members to participate meaningfully.
	Transparency in meetings, budgets, and outcomes helps citizens understand complex issues and decisions.
	Increases civic engagement and public trust in the board's integrity.
Effective Decision-Making	Transparent processes encourage diverse perspectives and informed debate.
	Access to accurate data and rationale helps stakeholders understand tradeoffs and priorities.
	Builds consensus and reduces misinformation or speculation.
Compliance and Legal Obligations	Adherence to open meetings and open records laws demonstrates respect for public oversight.
	Transparency mitigates risk of legal challenges or reputational damage.
	Demonstrates the board's commitment to operating within both the letter and spirit of the law.

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The Payoff

Strengthened community relationships.

Improved morale among staff and stakeholders.

Better alignment between the board, superintendent, and community goals.

Enhanced credibility and long-term support for public education.

GOVERNANCE TEAM INFLUENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

- Made up of *several* elected members

- One of the largest *employers* in the community

- Local *taxing* body

- Makes *decisions* regarding children's safety and well-being

How do each of these influence communication?

What are potential communication traps or danger areas related to the items above for the governance team?

1. The "Need to Know" Mindset (only need final decision and not the process behind it)
2. Inconsistent or Conflicting Messages (board not speaking as one)
3. Overreliance on Formal Channels (thinking they are sufficient)
4. Lack of Context in Financial Communications (not articulating purpose or trade-offs)
5. Silence in a Crisis (waiting for "all the facts")
6. Misjudging the Role of Social Media (ignoring rumors or failing to engage)
7. Forgetting the Human Element (framing in policy or procedure terms only)
8. Transparency Without Boundaries (oversharing confidential information)

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TRANSPARENCY: AREAS OF WORK

- Governance

- Strategic Planning

- Decision-making

- Policy

- Board Meeting

- Personnel

- Financial/Purchasing

- Ethics
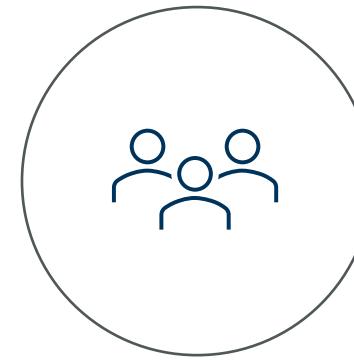
GOVERNANCE
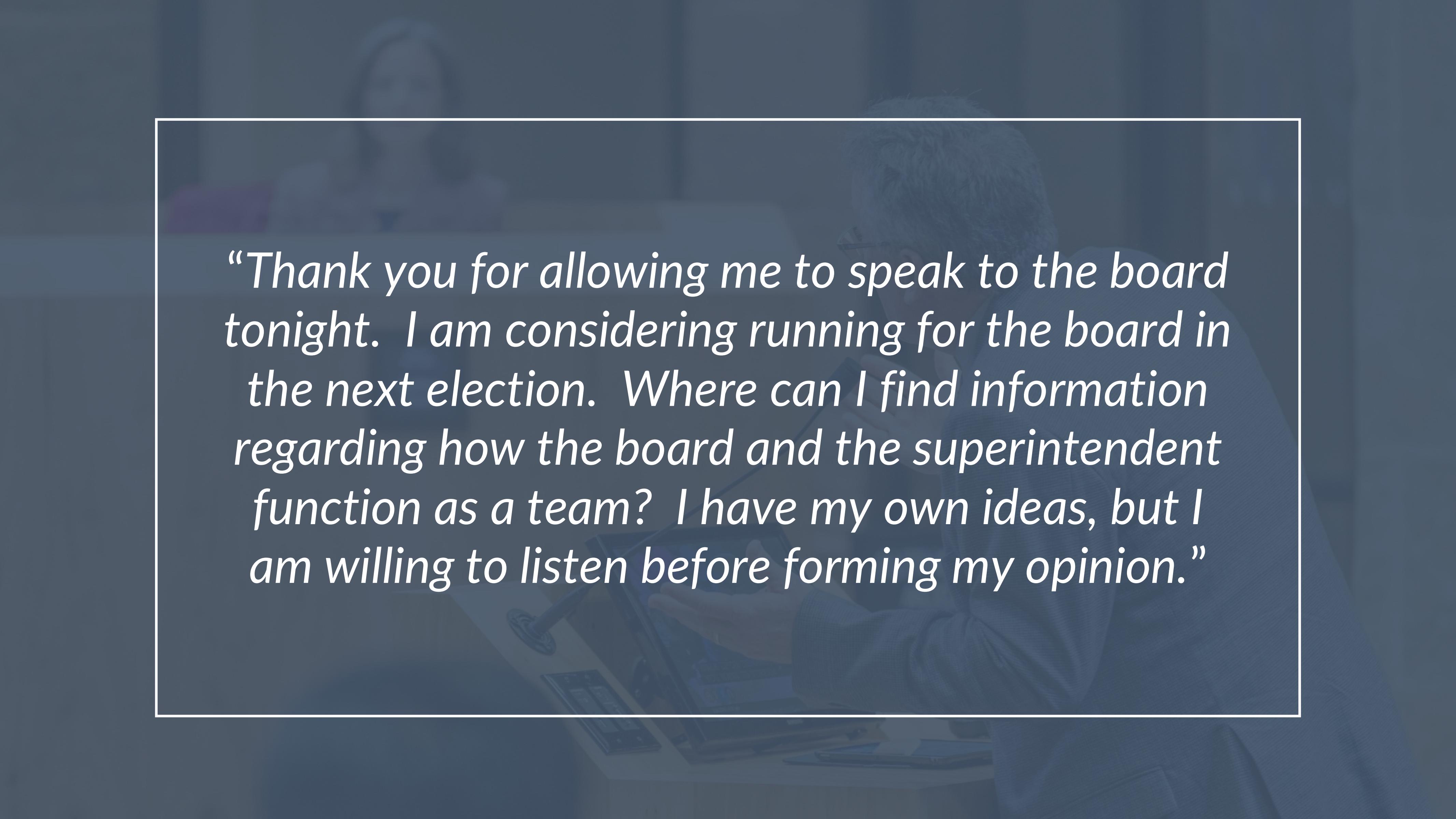
"*Thank you for allowing me to speak to the board tonight. I am considering running for the board in the next election. Where can I find information regarding how the board and the superintendent function as a team? I have my own ideas, but I am willing to listen before forming my opinion.*"

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

POINT 01
Board governance behavior can definitively impact student achievement.

POINT 02
Actions taken and decisions made by the governance team establish the climate and readiness of the entire organization.

POINT 03
The way the **governance team collectively distinguishes between the responsibilities** of its chief executive officer and the responsibilities of the Board will either **communicate consistency** and respect or facilitate potential dysfunction.

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The Leadership Team

School Board			Superintendent
End Result	←	**Focus** →	Means
1	←	**Sequence** →	2

What? Why? How much? How well?	}	**Questions to be addressed**	{	How? When? Where? By Whom?

Mission Goals Policies Linkages Assurances Standards	}	**Tools**	{	Strategies Procedures Regulations Assignments Documentation

Vote	←	**Methods** →	Recommend

RESPECT　　　　　**TRUST**　　　　　**CONFIDENCE**

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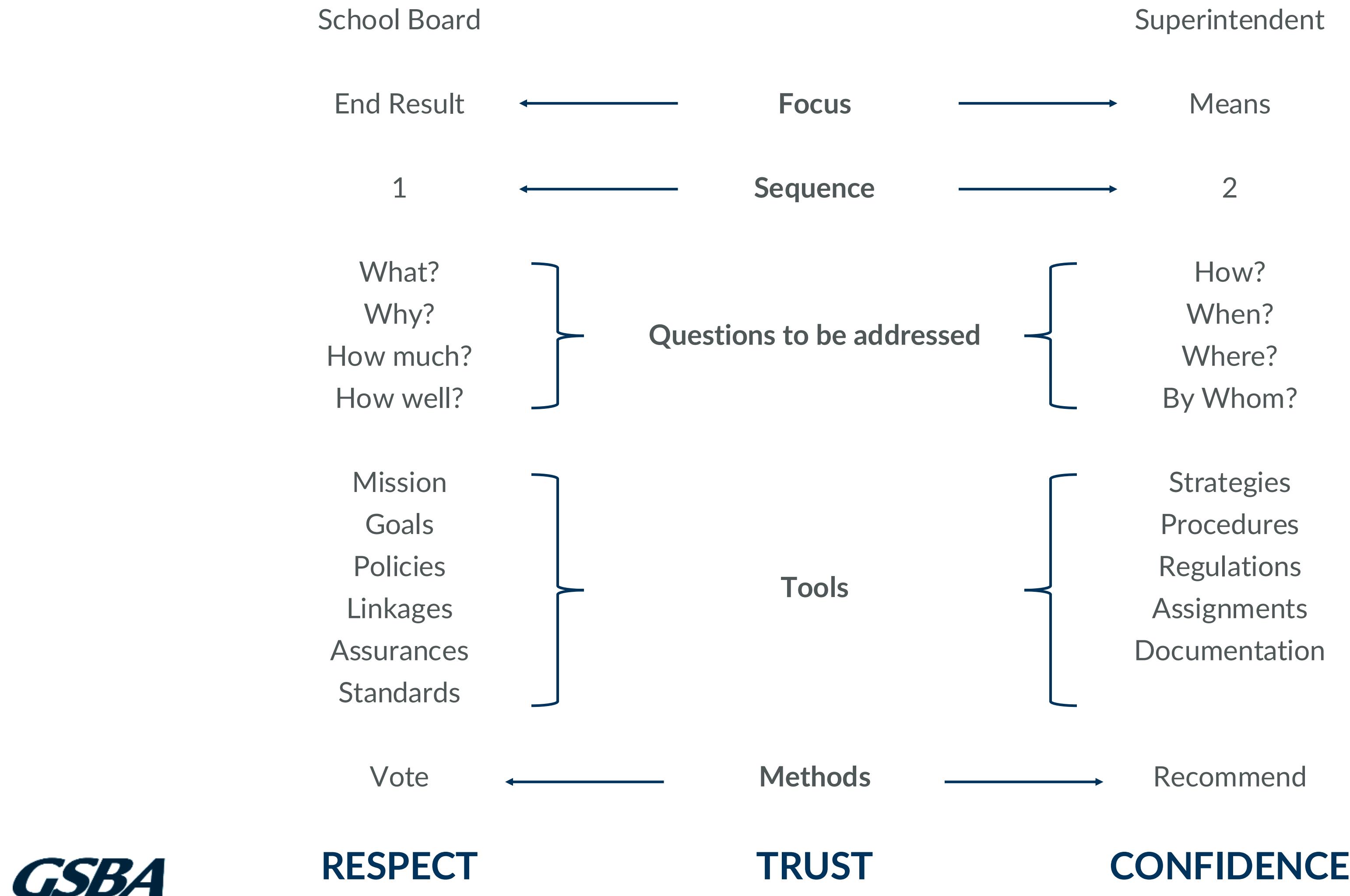
A CITIZEN'S PERSPECTIVE: GOVERNANCE TEAM COMMUNICATION

Governance

- I understand who to call with questions about daily system operations.
- I understand how to participate in the superintendent search process.
- I understand how to run for a seat on the board.
- I understand the working relationships between the individual board members, the board as a whole, and the superintendent.
- I understand where to easily find board meeting agendas and board policies and who to call with questions.
- I understand when annual board governance-related topics are handled, such as the budget, calendars, superintendent evaluation, audits, etc.
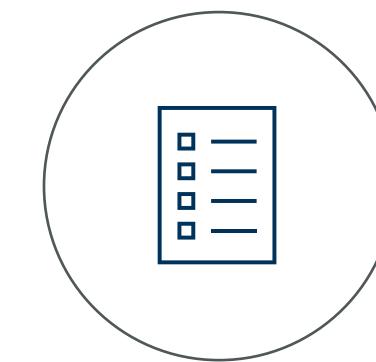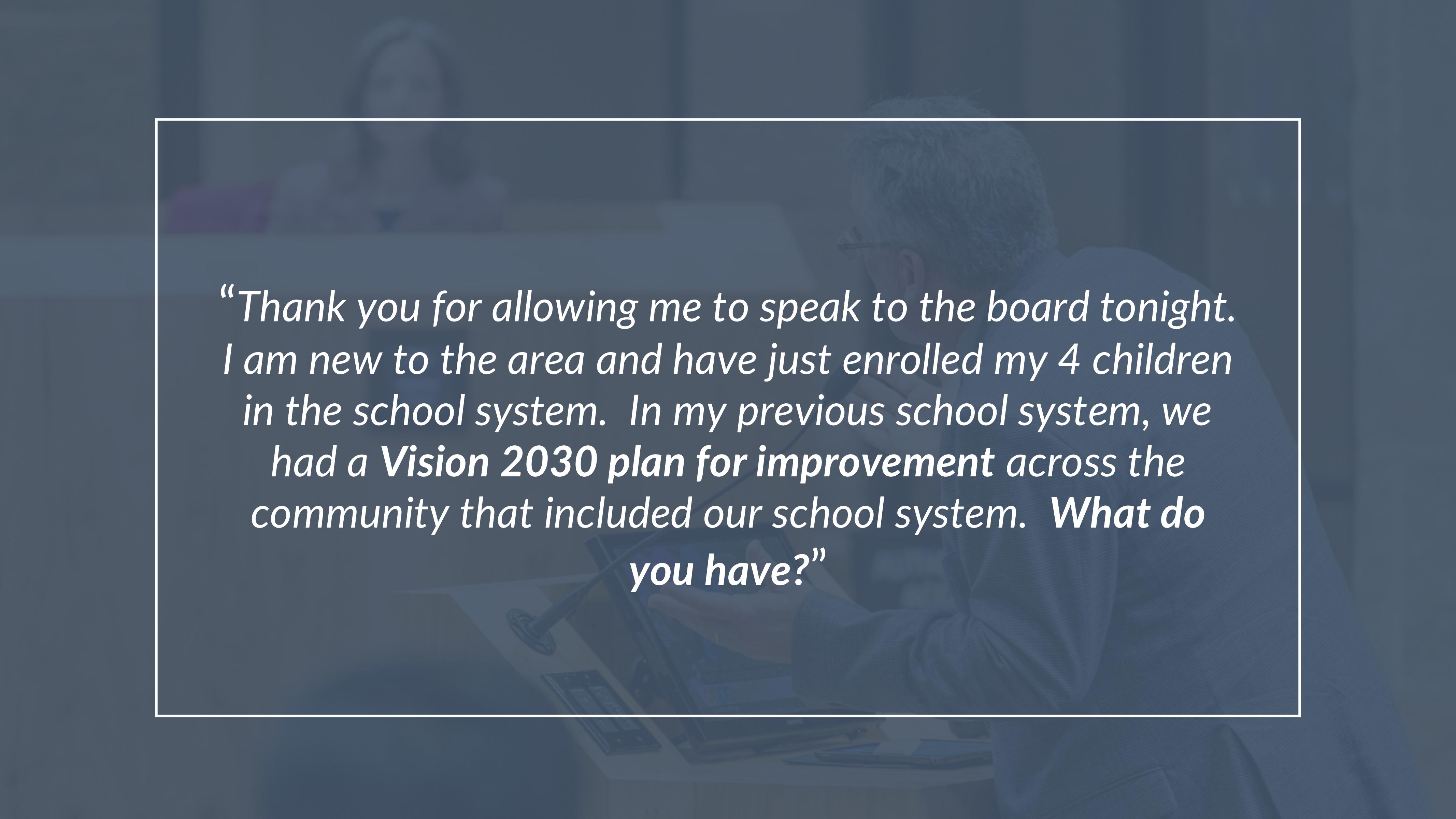
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STRATEGIC PLANNING

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"*Thank you for allowing me to speak to the board tonight. I am new to the area and have just enrolled my 4 children in the school system. In my previous school system, we had a **Vision 2030 plan for improvement** across the community that included our school system. **What do you have?**"*

STRATEGIC PLANNING

The governance leadership team, in collaboration with the community, adopts and enacts a planning process that results in an adopted system strategic plan designed to improve student achievement and organizational effectiveness.

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STRATEGIC PLANS – COMMUNICATION MULTIPLIERS

Strategic Plans provide a common vocabulary and a framework for conversations in board meetings, in public settings, and with staff.

- Mission – Vision – Beliefs
- Goals or Strategic Priorities
- Performance Objectives and Key Performance Indicators
- Initiatives
- Data Sets to be Monitored
- Timelines
- Progress – Next steps

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STRATEGIC IMPROVEMENT PLANNING MODEL

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Community Engagement

Continuous Improvement Process

Monitoring/ Reporting

Strategic

- Who are we?
- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to go?
- How will we know when we have arrived?

Operational

- How do we plan to get there?

Planning Team

Beliefs, mission, vision, SWOT analysis

- Strategic Goal Area 1
- Strategic Goal Area 2
- Strategic Goal Area 3

Strategy Map

Action Teams

- Performance Objective 1 with KPIs
- Performance Objective 2 with KPIs
- Performance Objective 3 with KPIs

Balanced Scorecard

Board and Staff

Action Plan / Initiatives

- Board of Education
- District
- Individual Schools

Budget, Board Self Assessment, Superintendent Evaluation, Staff Evaluations

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can the superintendent and the board work together to be transparent in communicating the strategic plan and the data that supports the board's action in monitoring the plan?

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KEEPING THE PLAN ALIVE

- Develop a clear strategy map and use it as a communication tool.

- Align all board meetings to the plan for the public to see.

- Ask timely, relevant questions connected to the plan.

- Make the plan and performance available for all to see.

- Revisit and adjust the plan based on performance.

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A CITIZEN'S PERSPECTIVE: GOVERNANCE TEAM COMMUNICATION

Strategic Planning

- I understand how to locate our system's strategic plan easily.

- I understand how and where to track our progress on each goal.

- I understand the focus areas for our strategic plan each year.

- I understand how decisions made by the board align with our strategic plan.

- I understand when and how I can participate in our next strategic plan development process.

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HOW CAN SIMBLI HELP?
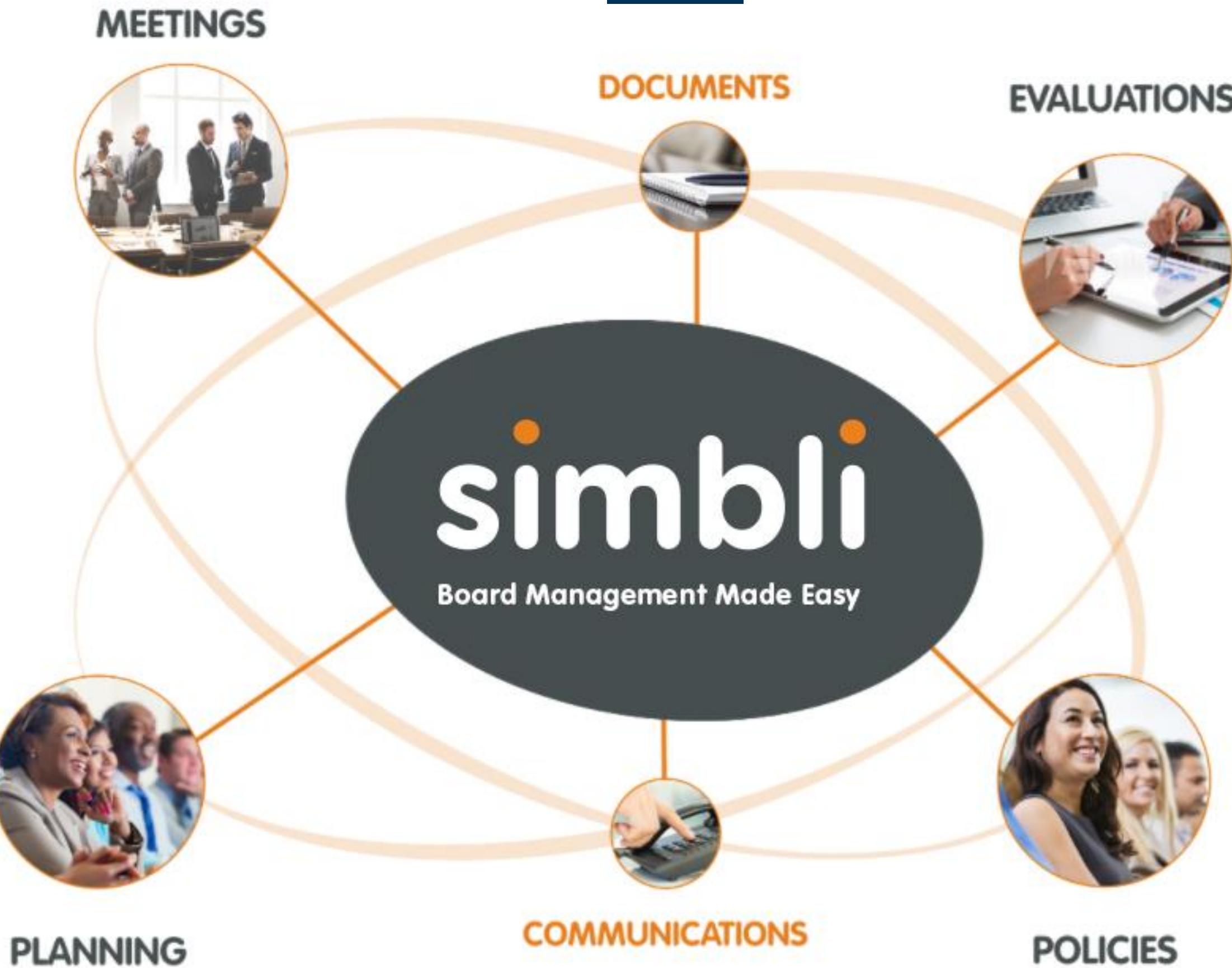
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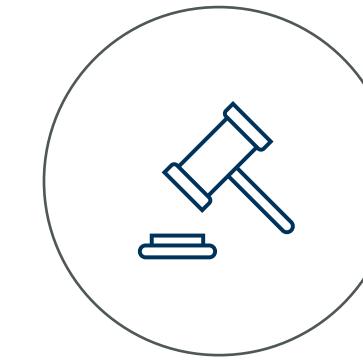
DECISION-MAKING

*"Thank you for allowing me to speak to the board tonight. How do you **receive and consider input from us as you make decisions** in the school system?"*

BOARD & COMMUNITY RELATIONS

POINT 01 **Build trust** as the team **communicates transparently** with all stakeholders.

POINT 02 Open communication is valued via **sending and receiving** information.

POINT 03 The board and Superintendent **seek input** and feedback relative to team **decision-making**.

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BOARD & COMMUNITY RELATIONS

POINT
04

The board should have clear **norms and protocols for seeking, receiving, and considering** input from all stakeholders.

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ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How does the governance team ensure effective communication strategies are in place to address and resolve the concerns of the community in a transparent manner?

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A CITIZEN'S PERSPECTIVE: GOVERNANCE TEAM COMMUNICATION

Board and Community Relations

- I understand how to give suggestions for improvement in our school system.

- I understand what to expect when I share my concerns with a board member regarding the daily operations of the school system.

- I understand what advisory groups are in place to assist decision-making in our school system.

- I understand how advisory groups are formed.

- I understand how to contact each central office department for support easily.

- I understand how crisis and safety information is shared and communicated.

- I understand how to email or call the superintendent.

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POLICY

"*Thank you for allowing me to speak to the board tonight. I would like to better understand how and when you approve policies that affect my child. I noticed that new laws were passed recently, and I have ideas for our policies here in our school system. I can't seem to easily locate your policies.*"

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

POINT 01 The board acts as a policy-making body that approves and adopts policy reflective of the spirit of its strategic plan.

POINT 02 The board delegates the authority to implement policy to the chief executive officer.

POINT 03 The board's actions consist mainly of actions that are aligned with policy.

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POLICY DEVELOPMENT GUARDRAILS TOP 10

1. **Stay in the Governance Lane** – Focus on *what* and *why*, not the *how* of administration.
2. **Align with Mission & Data** – Anchor every policy in student outcomes and district goals.
3. **Verify Legal & Practical Soundness** – Consult counsel, your state association staff, and state law before adopting.
4. **Keep the Process Transparent** – Share drafts, rationale, and timelines publicly.
5. **Consider Implementation Capacity** – Ask: "Can this realistically be carried out with current resources?"
6. **Monitor & Review** – Schedule periodic checks to ensure policies work as intended.
7. **Speak with One Voice** – Once adopted, support and communicate the policy consistently.
8. **Engage Stakeholders Wisely** – Seek input sincerely; balance it with data and legal guidance.
9. **Avoid Policy by Exception** – Don't rewrite rules for one-off situations.
10. **Document Intent** – Capture the "why" behind major policy decisions for future boards.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How does the board implement effective procedures that are transparent for adopting, revising, and following written policies that are clear, up-to-date, and in compliance with the school system's strategic plan, the state constitution, state and federal laws, and state board rules?

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A CITIZEN'S PERSPECTIVE: GOVERNANCE TEAM COMMUNICATION

Policy Development

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- I understand how to locate our system's policies easily.

- I understand when to expect policy discussions throughout the year.

- I understand how and when to give input regarding policies each year.

- I understand how open our superintendent and board are to my opinions regarding policies. I understand how advisory groups are formed.

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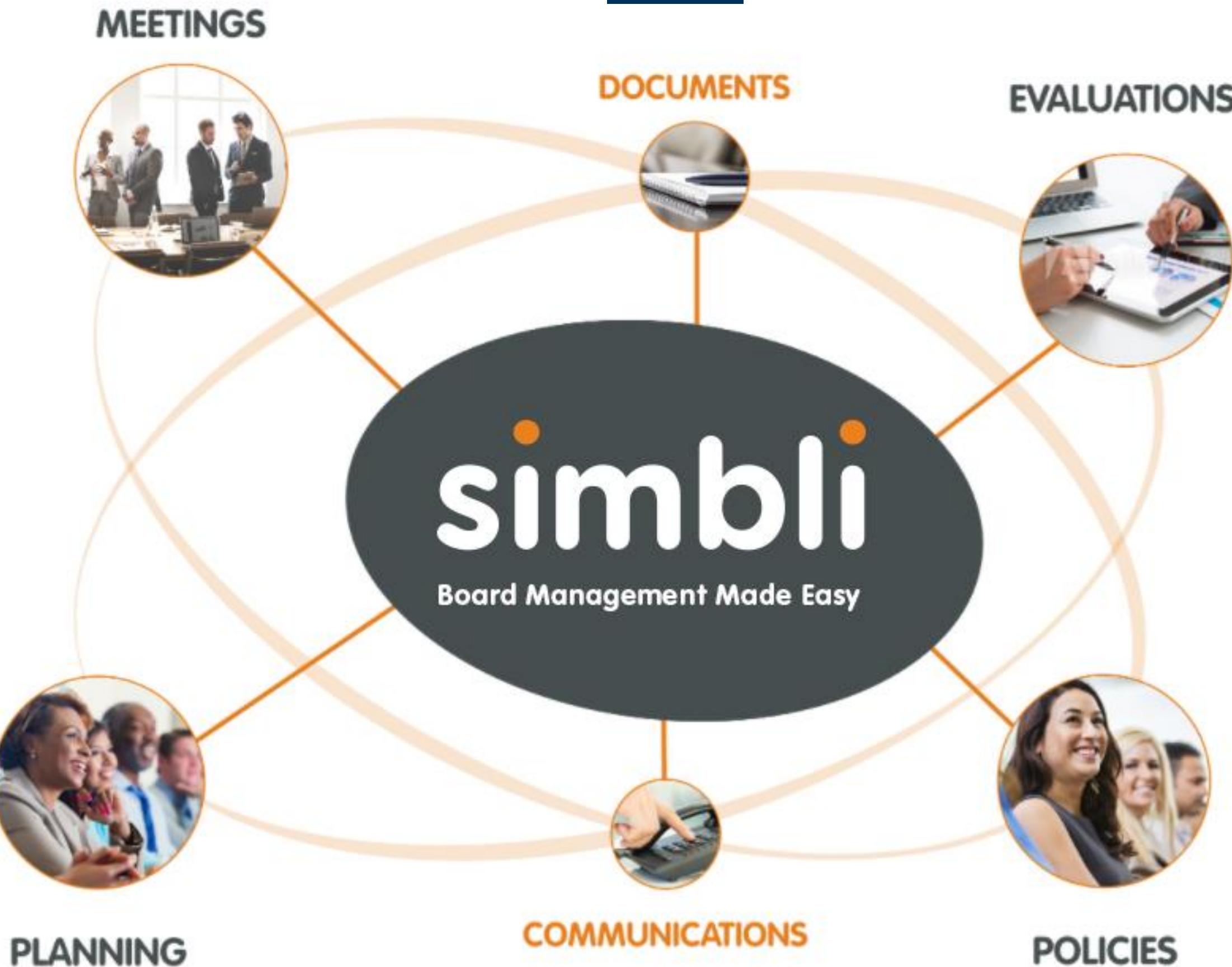
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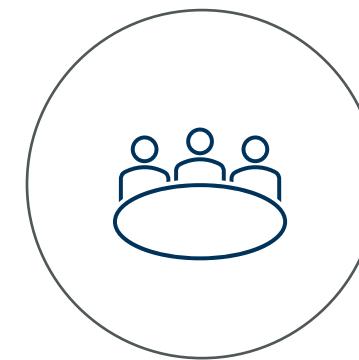
BOARD MEETINGS

*"Thank you for allowing me to speak to the board tonight. I **am new to the community** and have three students in your school system. I **have always been active and attended board meetings.** Where can I find your **meeting schedule**, **when can I see your agenda** each month, and how **can I be involved** in these meetings?"*

BOARD MEETINGS

POINT 01

The board meeting is the setting in which the board acts and conducts the business of the organization before the public. This is **the strongest form of communication** available to the governance team.

POINT 02

The board meeting will provide a strong force for the public and other stakeholders in forming **their** view and perception about the effectiveness of the governance leadership team.

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ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can your governance team ensure that board meetings are transparent?

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A CITIZEN'S PERSPECTIVE: GOVERNANCE TEAM COMMUNICATION

Board Meetings

- I understand where and when all monthly board meetings are held.
- I understand how called meetings are advertised and what they are for.
- I understand how to access board meeting agendas and meeting minutes.
- I understand how meetings will be structured and who will participate.
- I understand the protocols and expected tone of the meetings.
- I understand how to participate in meetings.
- I understand what an executive session is for and when it is held.
- I understand how the meeting officially ends.

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HOW CAN SIMBLI HELP?

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PERSONNEL

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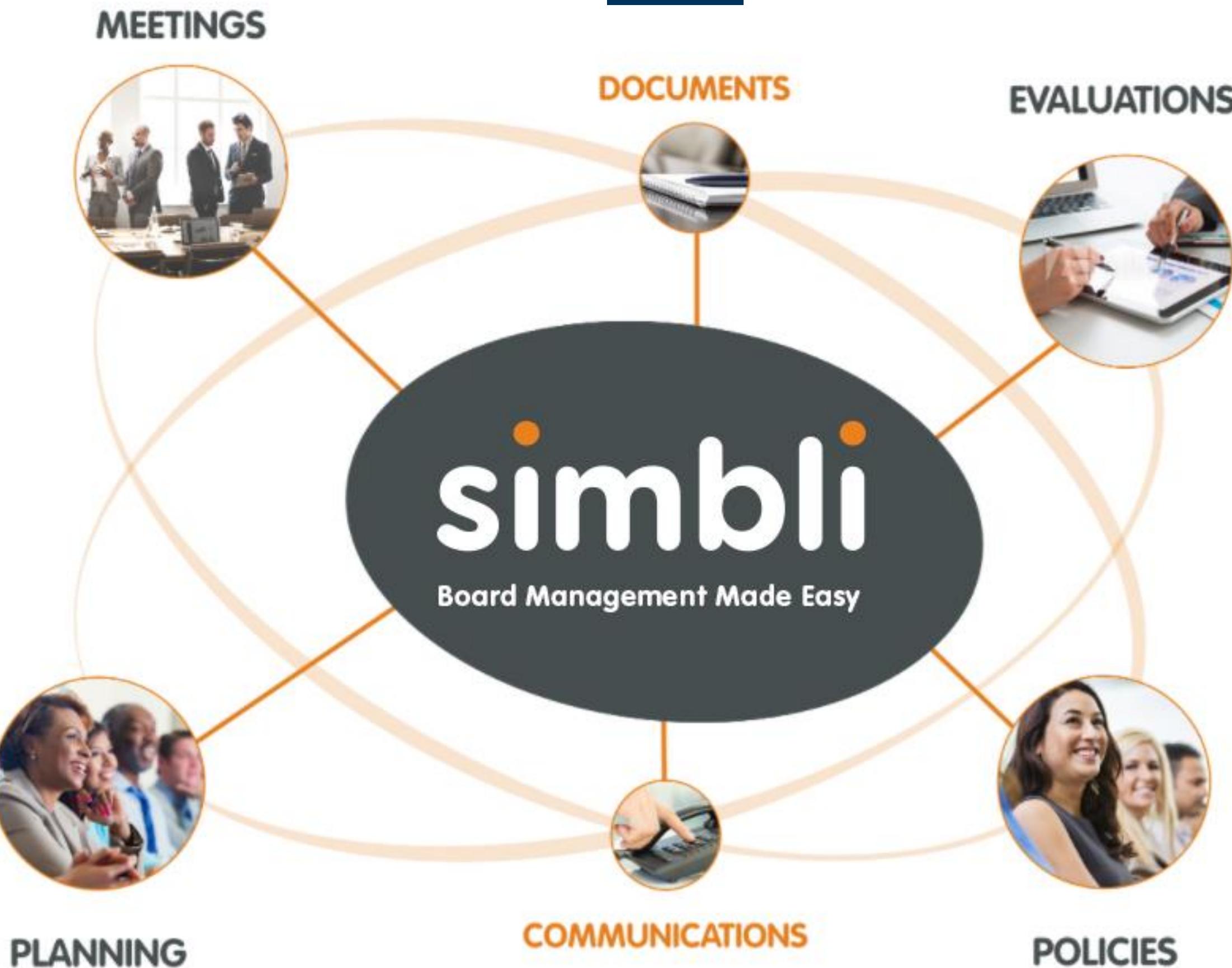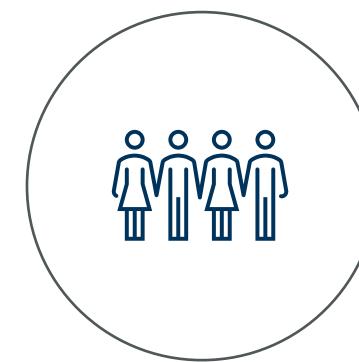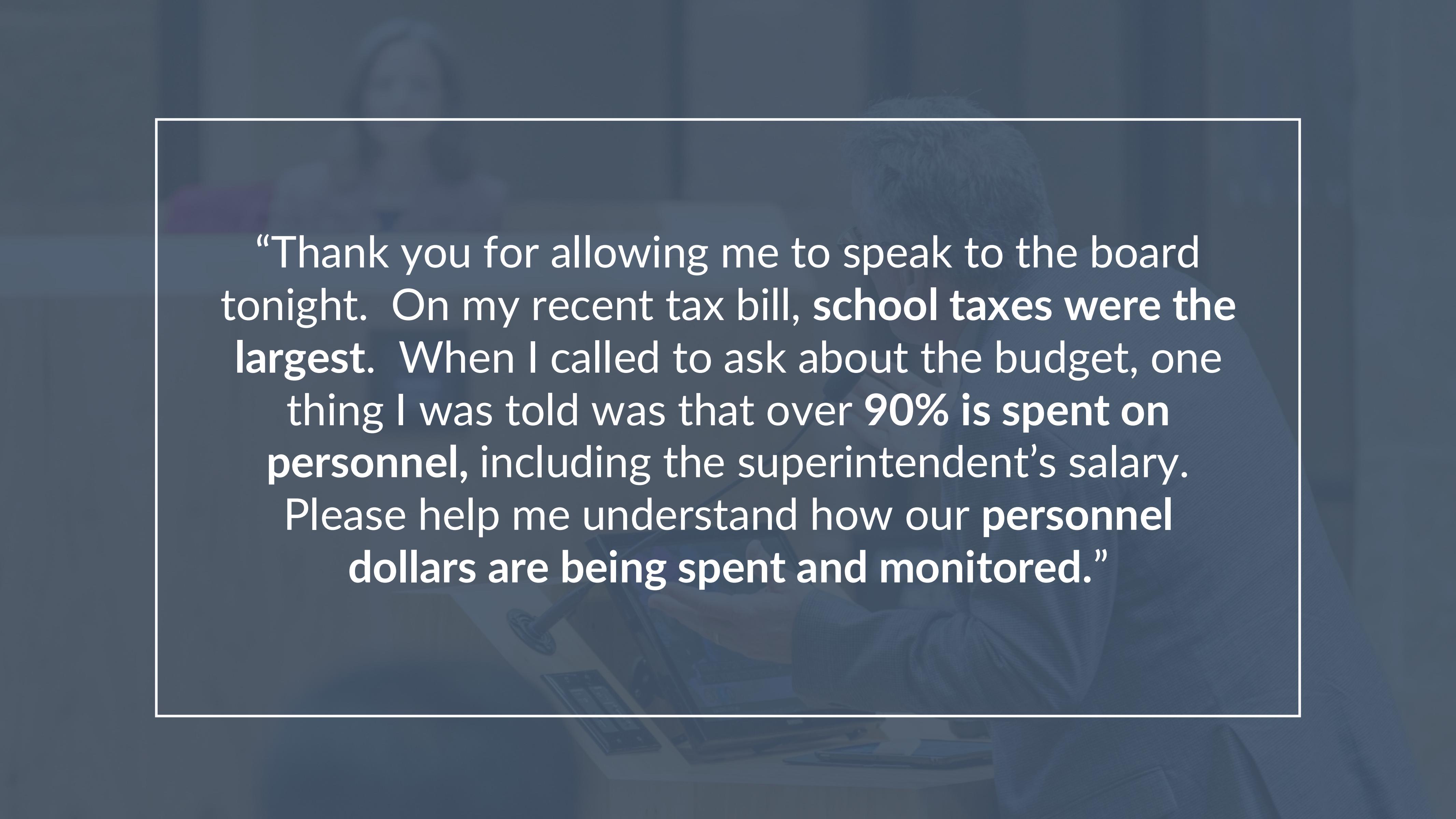
"Thank you for allowing me to speak to the board tonight. On my recent tax bill, **school taxes were the largest**. When I called to ask about the budget, one thing I was told was that over **90% is spent on personnel,** including the superintendent's salary. Please help me understand how our **personnel dollars are being spent and monitored.**"

PERSONNEL

POINT 01

The Board hires and evaluates the superintendent while delegating the authority to the superintendent to recommend the hiring of all organizational personnel.

POINT 02

The Board approves and adopts effective personnel policy relevant to hiring, evaluating, attracting, and retaining staff.

POINT 03

The superintendent must work to ensure that the board members understand their personnel responsibilities and assist them with obtaining pertinent information in order to perform their duties.

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PERSONNEL

POINT 04 The Board must approve and adopt effective personnel policy relevant to hiring, evaluating, attracting, and retaining staff.

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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

How is your governance team communicating through its implementation of personnel policy transparency?

Is there any opportunity for translucency?

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A CITIZEN'S PERSPECTIVE: GOVERNANCE TEAM COMMUNICATION

Personnel

- I understand the role of the superintendent in handling staff complaints.
- I understand how the board is involved in hiring personnel – including the superintendent.
- I understand how to find salary information.
- I understand how staff compensation is discussed as part of the budget process – raises, policies, etc.
- I understand the board's role in personnel hearings.

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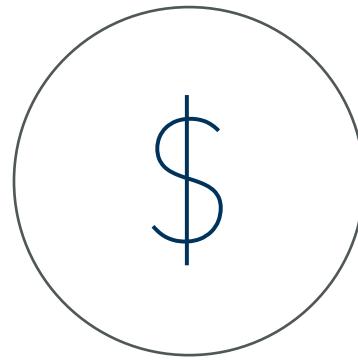
FINANCE
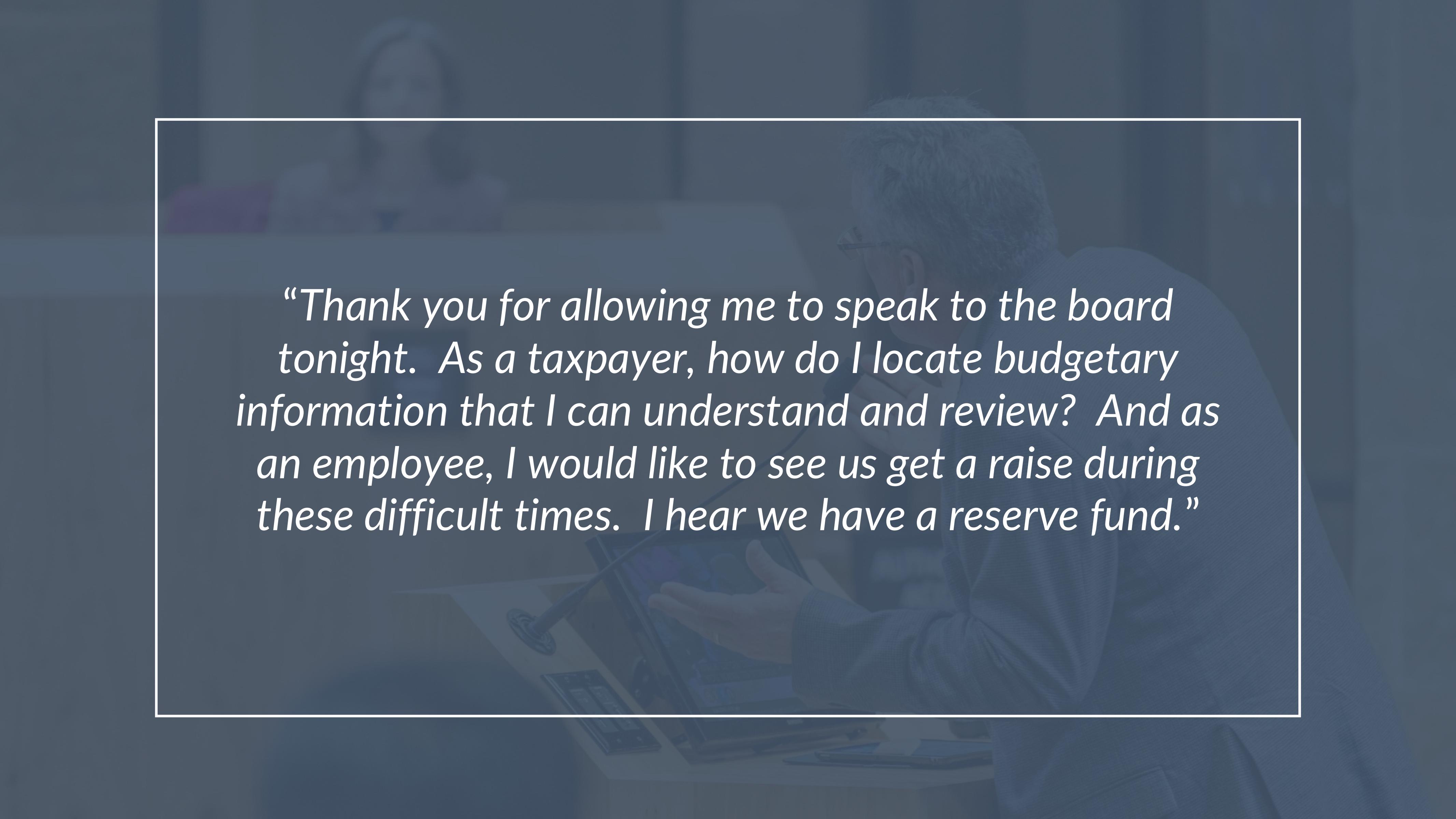
"Thank you for allowing me to speak to the board tonight. As a taxpayer, how do I locate budgetary information that I can understand and review? And as an employee, I would like to see us get a raise during these difficult times. I hear we have a reserve fund."

FINANCIAL GOVERNANCE

POINT 01 The Board works collaboratively to adopt a budget that supports the organization's current, adopted strategic plan. The board openly communicates with stakeholders regarding the budget.

POINT 02 The Board approves a budget recommended by the superintendent that reflects fiscal accountability and sound business practices.

POINT 03 The Board delegates authority to the superintendent for budget implementation.

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FINANCIAL GOVERNANCE

POINT 04

The superintendent must transparently communicate with the board regarding annual financial changes – step raises, cost of living raises, superintendent raises, audit findings, reserve growth, etc.

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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What procedure is implemented by the governance team to ensure that the superintendent recommends a budget and that the board adopts a budget that adheres to state law provisions, that is transparent and that is communicated to the public?

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A CITIZEN'S PERSPECTIVE: GOVERNANCE TEAM COMMUNICATION

Financial Governance

- I understand how our budget calendar works.
- I understand what budget hearings are, where they are held, and how to ask questions at these hearings.
- I understand the superintendent's role in the budget process.
- I understand the board's role in the budget process.
- I understand how the budget is monitored monthly and annually.
- I understand the amount of our system's reserve fund and what it is for.

ETHICS
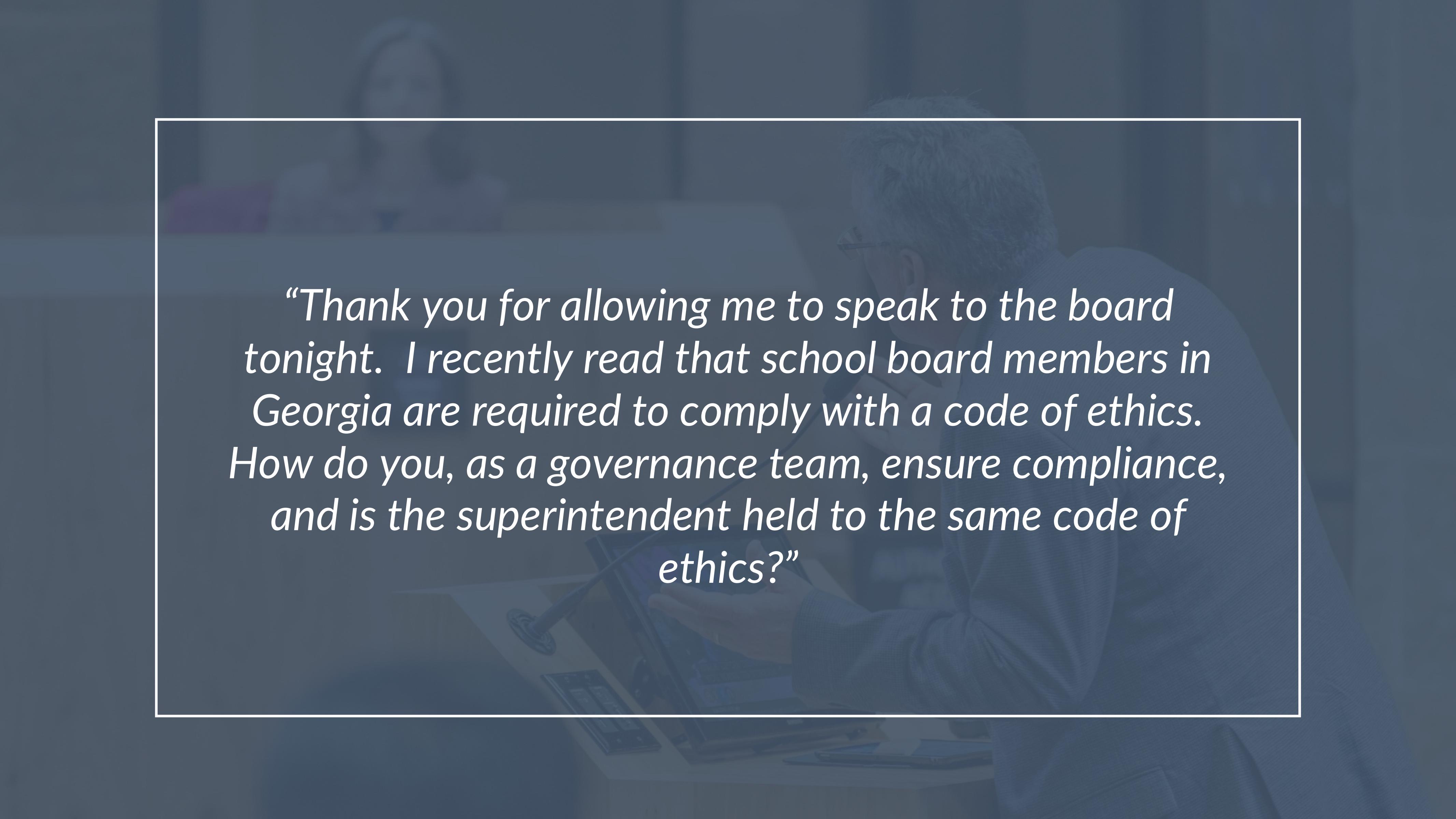
"Thank you for allowing me to speak to the board tonight. I recently read that school board members in Georgia are required to comply with a code of ethics. How do you, as a governance team, ensure compliance, and is the superintendent held to the same code of ethics?"

DOMAIN VIII: ETHICS

POINT
01
The Board team commits to effective team member behavior.

POINT
02
The Board agrees to and holds itself accountable for its standards of practice.

POINT
03
The Board emphasizes effective ethical behavior related to the governance team as a collective body, as well as individual team member behavior.

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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

How does the Board communicate ethical accountability?

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A CITIZEN'S PERSPECTIVE: GOVERNANCE TEAM COMMUNICATION

Ethics

- I understand the code of ethics for board members.
- I understand how the board communicates annual compliance with the code of ethics.
- I understand how the code of ethics influences board members' behavior and participation in meetings.
- I understand through observation how well our governance team models ethical behavior.

HOW CAN SIMBLI HELP?

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MEETINGS

DOCUMENTS

EVALUATIONS

simbli
Board Management Made Easy

PLANNING

COMMUNICATIONS

POLICIES
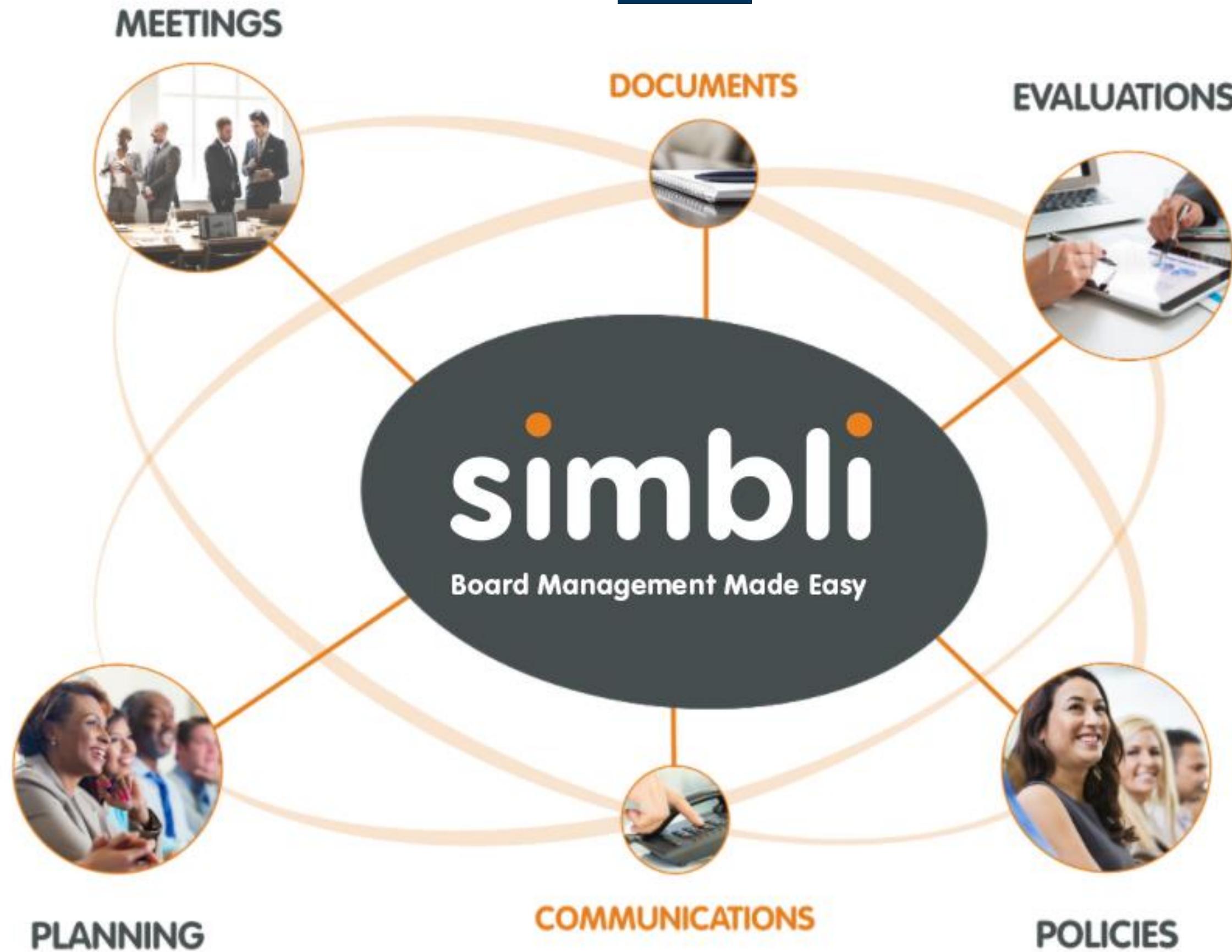
TRANSPARENCY, COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION

Transparency turns accountability into trust.

Trust turns communication into collaboration.

Collaboration turns vision into impact.

— The strength of a school board is measured not just by the decision it makes, but by how openly and honestly those decisions are shared.

CONTACT US

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