

HORACE

At the Five-Year Mark: The Challenge of Being 'Essential'

What are CES's priorities for school change at the half-decade mark? How fast, and how far, does a school need to go? What obstacles are most troublesome? And how can we best assess results in a movement that values intangible habits of mind over statistical measures of achievement?

FIVE YEARS AGO THIS AUTUMN, the Coalition of Essential Schools was launched. To mark the occasion the editor of HORACE talked with the Coalition's founder, TheodoreSizer, on where the effort stands today, asking him to assess its accomplishments and the challenges that lie ahead.

We started not by self-congratulation but by looking critically at the ways of change, inviting scrutiny of, and response to, the doubts that outsiders express.

HORACE: What have you found to be the commonest criticisms of Coalition schools?

SIZER: People like to think their kids have broad choices of what to study in the schools—they expect a range of special academic, vocational, and technical offerings. But in curricular matters the Essential School says, "Simplify, narrow, and focus."

This narrowing is a good thing if you agree with who's making the choices. If they're cutting out the very things you value in schools, though, you're going to be unhappy. How to address this? If the school is wisely set up, the effective constituency is the parents, kids, and teachers, so those choices are going to be made by them. Another answer is more choice among schools—if you don't like ours, you can go down the street.

But both these answers end up being curiously unsatisfactory. One

is always looking for the absolute answer, into which everybody *should* buy. Of course, I believe that Essential Schools provide such an answer—one has to have that belief if one is working on this. But we need a decent sense of humility, of course. Just maybe, we don't have this exactly right.

HORACE: Some schools in the Coalition have retained broad course offerings and a fairly traditional scheduling system, which differs significantly from the Essential School ideal. How do you respond to these schools?

SIZER: I believe one has to be both respectful of their argument and persistent in one's criticisms of it. The burden is on them to make the argument for "shopping mall" high schools, where a wide range of courses is offered in conventionally short class periods. If thorough work can accrue when the school day is cut up into seven snippets, and if kids get a lot of experience in synthesizing, rather than learning in unconnected separate areas, I'll be persuaded.

But I'm quite familiar with that kind of school. And my sense is that while many are very good, and many of their youngsters perform very well in their separate academic spheres, the real power of the youngsters to make sense of the world is pretty limited. I believe from my own experience that there's as much need and room for

profound improvement in elite schools as there is in schools in desperately troubled economic communities. I see a lot of these "successful" students as Brown University freshmen, and I am reminded daily of Judy Coddling's little aphorism: "Good enough isn't good enough." When she was principal of Bronxville High School, a very fine high school in an affluent suburb of New York, the question she posed was how this fine school could get a whole lot better. Focus, thoroughness, insistence that kids perform—all of which take time—are essentials in getting that level of improvement.

HORACE: So at this point would you say that there's a Coalition orthodoxy?

SIZER: At this stage of our evolution, we should be able to stray a lot. This is still early business; we all need to learn a great deal. If we are working with people who really think they know what they're doing and have good reasons for doing it, we should stay in close partnership with them. It would be dangerous to have too narrow an orthodoxy—although having no orthodoxy would be bad, too. But if people feel that they are addressing a reasonable interpretation of the

nine common principles, then we should be respectful of them.

Take, for example, the traditional 1893 curriculum decreed by the "Committee of Ten" headed by Harvard President Charles William Eliot, which is still accepted as the Bible by most high schools. It divides the academic subjects up into English, math, social studies, science, and language. But this is not what Essential School "orthodoxy" implies. These "disciplines" are ill defined themselves in any case, and they do not address the real world, where this society communicates through words, visual imagery, music, theatre, and a host of other ways. For a person to understand and to use the ways of communication widely accepted in this culture, that person has to see those in combination. The traditional curriculum does not address that at all—art and music are off to the side, theatre is a frill. It's very difficult to conceive of a truly powerful schooling that really reaches the potentials for rich communication and also chops up subjects the way they were in the 1890s by virtue of academic politics. The Committee of Ten's report did establish standards, and it gave some order to the chaos that was nineteenth century curriculum. But what was constructive in 1893 is not equally constructive in 1990.

Two things apply when people differ with orthodoxy and get away with it. As soon as you say "interdisciplinary," for one thing, you give the store away—because you assume you have disciplines. My question is three steps back from that: How do you construe knowledge? This is a much more difficult and rich question, and to expect any school to have an easy, ready answer for it is merely silly. So if schools are wrestling with this question, it would be ridiculous to ask more.

The other point is that you can't do everything at once. You work on one piece before another, even though you know that everything

ultimately has to go together. You have to be patient.

The important place for a school to agree, if it really is to be an Essential School, is this: The way one construes knowledge today is in some ways profoundly different from the way it was construed in the late 19th century. And the curriculum must in some way reflect this.

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So a vocational-technical emphasis would be acceptable if it is a way to get into the abstractions, to teach kids how to think. For example, in *Horace's Compromise* I write about a teacher I call Mr. Gross, who teaches electricity—but he's really teaching the most fundamental logic, a way of thought. And at Thayer High School in Winchester, New Hampshire, community apprenticeships not only serve the purpose of keeping kids in school—they very clearly show the connection between schoolwork and the version of the world those kids understand. You've got to show some relation between math, for example, and how the pieces of a house fit together—to come back and fit it into an education in the abstractions of math or physics. If this didn't happen, the kids would



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be ill educated, and Thayer wouldn't be an Essential School. Because if someone said to those kids, "Build me a house of this new material you've never seen before," they wouldn't be able to do it.

HORACE: Any other criticisms Essential Schools encounter?

SIZER: Many object to our expectation that kids perform in order to progress. Folks want their kids to graduate with a high school diploma at age seventeen or eighteen. School's function as a rite of passage is very highly regarded.

My experience is that when you push these critics, on common sense grounds alone, their arguments weaken even in their own eyes. Can anyone at all argue, for example, that an adolescent's intellectual development is best pursued by exposure in 50-minute snippets to sharply differentiated subjects, each planned in total isolation from the others? Can anyone believe that students should be the passive recipients of teacher's talk for up to 90 percent of the time? Can anyone today really believe that schools can be properly evaluated solely upon those items that are easily transformed into statistics? These are not hyperbolic or myopic questions.

One of the real problems we all have is trying to think freshly about schooling when the routines of keeping school are so deeply ingrained. People tend to think, "Of course we have to divide our curriculum into English and history and math and science and languages," the way an elite group of ten men decreed a century ago. The fact is that high school hasn't always been the way it is now, and it doesn't have to be that way. Let's not start with that, even if that's where it will come out. Let's start somewhere else.

HORACE: What conditions are most vital if a Coalition school is to succeed? And what are the greatest risks they face?

SIZER: They are most at risk if they lack a stable and sustained leadership. If the program is to succeed, the principals, superintendents, and key teachers can't come and go. Such turnover is a fact of life, of course, but if you have five superintendents in five years, as in one of the Coalition school districts, it's pretty hard. If there is turnover, it has to be thoughtfully managed, so a sensible and bold direction that a school has taken is not stomped down through the inattention of authorities who make inappropriate appointments.

Where you get a critical mass of stable and committed faculty—what I call "senators"—with a founders' stake in the change, you get movement. When there isn't that mass, then the school is very much at risk.

I have a hunch, too, that unless there is a critical mass of the faculty that feels committed and involved, things falter. That mass is made up of what I call "senators"—persons who are widely respected inside the school, and known for their wisdom and integrity. It usually includes the principal, but not necessarily—we've had principals come and go in situations that have had stable and committed senator-teachers. Where you get a group of people like this—it has to be 20 or 30 percent—with a founders' stake in the change, you get movement. When there isn't that mass, then the school is very much at risk.

In schools where the energetic leadership of the Coalition is drawn from one segment only, or is small, or is perceived as newcomers who

haven't earned their stripes, you have problems—not necessarily failures.

HORACE: The Essential School ideal has sometimes been rephrased as a "stripped-down" curriculum. How does this relate to the "back-to-basics" movement in education? And, in general, how do Coalition schools fit into the broader picture of the many restructuring efforts that are going on these days?

SIZER: "Back to basics" in many cases has simply meant drill in the traditional academic operations—learn the multiplication table, memorize the names of the vice-presidents. We're not talking about that kind of thing. For us, what's basic is at once more complicated and more realistic than McGuffey Readers and spelling bees.

We're not a restructuring project primarily—and initially we weren't one at all. Our work is in changing pedagogy—it starts with kids learning, and how teachers teach them. The changes in structure follow from that, down the road. We don't redesign a structure first. Instead we say, "We don't like how kids are learning."

There are two kinds of restructuring movements—those which restructure what's happening on the outside of schools, and those like us, which change what's happening on the inside. In general, there's less emphasis on our kind. When Bush talks about restructuring, for example, he's talking about things like school choice—restructuring what's happening in the *system*.

Other efforts say: We must empower teachers, so we're going to reorganize the school structure in order to do that. Very often those efforts make no reference to *why* teachers need more power (other than their own self esteem), or *why* kids will benefit from such a move. "School site management" and "empowering teachers" are popular buzz words—but very often when you push, their implications have

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not been thought through. When you ask "What kind of power do you want teachers to have, and why?" very few have answers. One of the indications of this is how little discussion there is of changing the *insides* of schools.

In fact, many of these school reform efforts have talked very little about kids. You hear more about adults—what it is that teachers should be and do, what the system should be and do. There's remarkably little questioning of what we know about kids learning—and having identified that, how we use that knowledge to make sure that they learn more effectively.

The consequence of any serious thought about how kids learn is that teachers do become empowered—because the only person who really knows how an individual kid learns is the teacher who works with that kid. This is a quite different argument from the one that says, "Empower teachers because if we don't give them power they'll quit." That's a good argument—we are happy kin with those movements who argue this. But ours is a different angle—we start with a prior reason and proceed to empowerment.

HORACE: What's the most urgent recommendation you have for Essential Schools as the next five years of the Coalition begins?

SIZER: The weak link in the project now is specificity about exhibitions. We have to be much clearer as a group of schools about *what it is that kids should know and be able to do*—the standards deserving of a high school diploma. From school to school these exhibitions will differ, because those standards can be played out in different ways. But CES needs a wide variety of answers that help us get a stronger sense of what our common standards should be—in the general sense, "What do high school students need to know in this century?"

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We should have a wide set of examples of what kids should be able to do, thereby showing what they know. The totality will represent a common standard the Essential Schools agree upon. An individual school can look at these examples and use most of them, altering some to fit its situation. I would be happy in the next stage if ten Essential Schools would get together and shoot for a common culminating exhibition, maybe even

bring their students together three years from now.

This kind of common expectation can work even though students have a wide range of ability levels. Let's say that we end up with ten domains in which we want kids to show mastery. Then we say to the individual kid, "You decide how to display your mastery of this domain." That shows that there is more than one domain that can be regarded as essential, and more than one way to excel. There are enough domains so that someone who is a red hot achiever in one may have trouble in others. Kids with trouble in quantum physics may have to demonstrate mastery in another area of science. But all students would have to meet minimum standards in all of these domains.

So another challenge for Essential Schools is to identify these domains. We already see this happening at Central Park East Secondary School, in their Senior Institute, where Haven Henderson has been working on figuring out how kids are going to show mastery, making contracts with advisers, and so forth.

Talking about exhibitions forces one to be clear about curriculum. My sense is that many Coalition schools are weak on this right now. When teachers ask us, "What is the physics I should teach?" our answer is, "What do you want kids to be able to do? Then you can answer the question." The danger lies in saying, "This is the physics teachers will teach."

I remain convinced that exhibitions are the heart of an Essential School. Unless a faculty is clear on the content and standards of what kids are able to do, it is very hard indeed to set priorities for the overall program of the school. This is not just a difficult technical task for teachers; it is a virtual shift in how one perceives schooling itself. And that tests severely the imagination, skills, and commitments of teachers. Again, the question rests on common sense. Schools exist to

help kids be able to do things of consequence, not as places where certain things are purveyed, with little interest in whether the students ever benefit. If one thinks of secondary schooling as something far more than that which can be reduced to a simple paper-and-pencil test, then the task becomes extremely demanding.

HORACE: Is it better, in your view, to start an Essential School small or to jump right in with both feet?

SIZER: Be bold. I'm increasingly persuaded that schools which go slow and do a little at a time end up doing so little that they succeed only in upsetting everything without accruing the benefits of change. I would urge schools in the Coalition to act boldly enough to give a reasonable promise of noticeable improvement. It's easy to start out by saying, "We will take interdisciplinary classes in social studies and English twice a week; four teachers will be involved." And at the end of the year, those kids will have benefited, but the discussion won't have gone very far forward in the school as a whole. This kind of go-slow approach doesn't address the larger issues: exploring a variety of forms of expression that may be understood in variety of ways.

In the 1930s the Progressive Education Association launched a school reform movement known as the Eight Year Study, an effort by a group of schools and colleges that was in many ways closer to ours than any other in this century. The effort came to an abrupt halt with

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the Second World War, but certain findings, necessarily tentative, have nonetheless emerged. The most encouraging of these, to me, shows that graduates of those secondary schools which had attempted particularly bold redesign—substantially rethinking and then recasting the designs and expectations for student work—were most dramatically ahead of those from traditional schools during their college careers. Facing up squarely to the demonstrable inefficiencies of school-keeping, and moving beyond them, seems to be the greatest guarantor of student success. Gradualism can be costly; tentativeness hurts.

These are tough lessons. But even the very initial work by the Coalition schools longest in the project underscores this observation. The most promising, it seems, are those that have most aggressively simplified, focused, and personalized their programs and demanded much of the students. In many cases, these are schools serving disproportionately low-income populations—because the communities running these schools realize that the risk of status quo is greater than the risk of change.

That courage can be found in the faculties of even more affluent schools, where frustrated and despairing teachers ready to act on their knowledge and observations are often blocked from doing so. The opposition is sometimes merely thoughtless, sometimes filled with poignant confusion. Sometimes

common-sense critiques are shrugged off with embarrassment because to change would upset the very status quo that maintains teachers and administrators in their positions. As I listen to many school folk, I sense too little belief that those in policy positions will support powerful new ideas.

But the opportunity for boldness is present, however frustratingly difficult at times it might appear. The context is at hand that can allow that courage to emerge. Particularly with our new alliance with the Education Commission of the States in the Re:Learning initiative, a different sort of hierarchy is emerging that can cut through many of the thorniest barriers to change.

HORACE: Where do you sense faculty opposition coming from? And what can be done to allay the fears behind it?

SIZER: Our faculties need time, support, and encouragement in order to prepare and re-prepare themselves to do what is often for them new work. This is an urgent task for all Coalition schools in the next five years: to marshal themselves, as a faculty, to achieve a much more effective level of schooling. If that's called staff development, three cheers for it—but the words "staff development" and "training" get in our way here, because it's got to be done from the bottom up. It's the faculty figuring out what it needs to know because of the new programs it wishes to start, rather than someone else's decision that faculty should be inoculated with someone's new idea.

This last is closely related to one of the more nagging issues that confronts Coalition school faculties: how teachers may become "generalists" rather than specialists in one area only. Many teachers find this an impossible pill to swallow. They see their strength and merit in a traditionally defined subject area, whether it be physics or auto

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mechanics, and they feel ill equipped to meet an acceptable standard outside that field. In a sense, these feelings serve as an enormously conservatizing force, endlessly reinvigorating the way the 1893 Committee of Ten construed the high school curriculum.

Again, common sense intrudes. We teachers are in the business of helping youngsters get into the habit of thinking resourcefully and hard about important things. And the important aspects of this world, alas, are not always put into little

hermetically sealed boxes. It is a truism that not much physics is learned without certain mathematics, and that questions about ethics arise in science classes. However, the matter goes far beyond this, to the very model of the kind of citizen we wish our students to become: a citizen not bound to think hard and well in only one particular area, but rather to be resourceful—and when needed, humble—against the wide range of affairs that modern life forces upon us.

What isn't at all clear is how to break out of our little boxes, to see ourselves both as responsible scholars in a particular area or two and as equally responsible scholars in a more generalized and catholic sense. At the heart of this stance is humility, and the acting out by teachers as well as students of the constant process of learning. "I don't have all the answers," we must learn to say, "but I have some sense of how to proceed to get them, and I wish you to join with me in that quest."

Essential Schools' Performance: Some Preliminary Figures

1. Attendance and Drop-out Rates

Central Park East Secondary School:

- Central Park East Secondary School attendance rate, 1988-89: 91%
- New York City Public Schools official attendance rate, 1988-89: 79%
- Central Park East Secondary School drop-out rate, 1988-89: 0%
- New York City Public Schools official drop out rate, 1988-89: 26.8%

Hope High School:

- Hope Essential School attendance rate, 1986-88: 87%
- Hope "regular" High School attendance rate, 1988-89: 78%
- Hope Essential School drop-out rate, 1987-88: 9%
- City of Providence official drop-out rate, 1987-88: 44.9%

Thayer High School:

- Thayer Essential School drop-out rate, 1988-89: 1.5%
- Thayer High School drop-out rate (pre-Essential status, 1981): 10%

Westbury High School:

- Westbury Essential School attendance rate, 1988-89: 96%
- Westbury "regular" High School attendance rate, 1988-89: 91%

2. Academic Performance

Thayer High School:

- 1986 (pre-Essential status) California Achievement Test Scores, grades 7-10: 49th percentile
- 1988 California Achievement Test Scores, grades 7-10: 58th percentile

Westbury High School:

- Westbury Essential School: 82% of ninth graders passed TEAMS tests
- Westbury "regular" High School: 61% of ninth graders passed TEAMS tests

University Heights High School:

- In 1989, only 33% of incoming college freshmen in New York possessed a reading level qualifying them to take college classes. After completing the first stage of the University Heights Essential Program, 77% of University Heights students' reading level qualified them to take college classes.

3. Discipline

Pleasure Ridge Park High School:

- Pleasure Ridge Park Essential School discipline referrals, 1986-87: Pleasure Ridge Park Essential School students comprised 20% of the junior class and generated only 14% of junior class disciplinary referrals to assistant principal's office.

Westbury High School:

- Westbury Essential School discipline referrals, 1988-89: WES students comprised 14.5% of school population and generated only 3.75% of overall disciplinary referrals to assistant principal.

4. Pursuit of Higher Education

Hope High School:

- Hope Essential graduates, 1988-89: 60% went on to higher education
- Hope "regular" High School graduates, 1988-89: 6% went on to higher education

Thayer High School:

- Thayer Essential School graduates, 1988-89: 55% went on to higher education in 1988-89
- Thayer High School graduates (pre-Essential status, 1981): 10% went on to higher education

Walbrook High School

- Walbrook Essential School graduates, 1988-89: about 50% went on to higher education
- City of Baltimore School System graduates, 1988-89: 11.1% went on to higher education

For more statistics and school addresses, write CES, Box 1938, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912.

Many teachers find becoming generalists an impossible pill to swallow. They see their strength in a traditionally defined subject area, and they feel ill equipped to meet an acceptable standard outside that field. These feelings serve as an enormously conservatizing force.

HORACE: Any other urgent advice for Essential Schools?

SIZER: Be very attentive to the culture of the school, and particularly to respect for the kids. Make sure that things are so arranged that the youngsters feel an obligation for the school as a community, and get into the habit of taking care of it for themselves to some considerable degree. That ends with kids understanding that they have an obligation to each other—that if you know something well, you have an obligation to share it with someone else. This is an issue of expectations—it plays out in the rules of a school, its rituals, who is responsible for things. Necessarily, it starts from the top, because most schools are hierarchical bureaucracies; unless the school wants to develop a community and a set of associated responsibilities, it's not going to happen. And it involves students—one school that wanted to start this out with little kids whimsically suggested a "rent-a-twelfth-grader" program to get it going. Some people see this as an issue of school governance; some as subtle attitudes on the part of everybody; some as a matter of community service. They're all right.

HORACE

HORACE: How do you assess the progress of the Coalition at this point? How're you doing?

One must answer this in a variety of ways, all of them honest. The first answer is that it's still too early to tell. We're still in our infancy, so to expect quantifiable "results" at this stage is premature. A relatively small number of the fifty-plus schools currently involved have programs sufficiently shaped and in place that they can serve as the basis for a judgment.

Still, political authorities and parents want to see evidence of results now, not sometime in the future. Political authorities, in particular, like to reduce results to numbers, which they can put up on wall charts. We must be respectful of this need on the part of politicians, and put forward such "numbers" that we have, even as we cast them quite tentatively.

Keeping in mind that these are incomplete data from the short term, and looked at in this narrow, statistically oriented way, the record of Coalition schools thus far is very encouraging. Test scores are up; dropout and attendance figures have improved; discipline is better. [See page 6] At Walbrook High School in Baltimore, for example, the dropout rate for 1988-89 was 1.8 percent in the Essential School program, compared to 23 percent for the "regular" program. And scores on the Maryland Functional Test for that group averaged 90.3 out of 100, versus 72.92 in the "regular" program. (Remember that at Walbrook Essential School students are selected randomly for inclusion, via computer.) Although few Essential programs were launched long enough ago to have graduated seniors already, where this is the case college attendance is going up. Every one of the youngsters who graduated from the Essential program at Pascal High School in Fort Worth, Texas went on to higher education, though usually at that school only

two out of three will do so. When the governors meet in Charlottesville this is the kind of thing they howl and scream over, and we can rejoice that our results are encouraging.

Still, against our own standards it's a hard answer to give. Some of the things Essential Schools value most do not lend themselves easily to efficient "measurement." They are habits of mind and of spirit, not merely attendance at school or the passing of tests that require good memory work. The test of things like this is in how the kid performs long after he or she has left school.

A hard thing to measure in statistics, for example, is the quality of persistence that arises from self confidence, or what I call in another book a sense of *agency*. I received a postcard earlier this week, for example, from a social worker who said she had just met three high school boys in a downtown Providence plaza whose "highly positive attitudes towards their futures" gave her new hope for the troubled youth she works with. All of them, she said, were Hope Essential seniors.

To put the problem another way, what is thoughtful behavior? Folks in Essential Schools are just as concerned about drunk driving as about physics, because we're talking about developing *habits of mind*, and cause and effect is equally relevant to both. Our common principle of decency is very strongly

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meant. We want to take the time in the school day to develop these standards, even if it means taking the short-term risk of reducing emphasis on things that are more easily measured.

For these reasons and others, I get very cautious about the "how are we doing" question. This caution is not evasion. It emerges from the very unfair way in which this society defines success. At the Coalition, while early statistics are clearly encouraging, we must keep open minds, realizing that our ultimate objective is a complex and subtle one, not addressed either favorably or unfavorably to any significant degree by conventional measures of achievement.

In the meantime, our assessment of the performance of youngsters in Coalition schools continues to broaden and deepen. In addition to evaluations done at the school level, a major evaluative effort—dubbed "Taking Stock" and involving long-term follow-up of students after graduation—will soon be launched under the umbrella of the

Re:Learning project. The work of the ethnographers who are following our project will continue, and though it is not narrowly evaluative, their documentation of the evolution of programs in eight schools and in our central staff will give a rich picture of how this effort has emerged.

We remain under no illusions that the kind of work we are engaged in is easy, or that results will quickly emerge. I, for one, understand better today than I did half a decade ago the immense importance of the political and policy context in which this change must take place. Our alliance with the Education Commission of the States in the Re:Learning project brings to bear the political and financial resources of state governments behind our collective work. It also allies with us state and district leaders who are as concerned with the thoughtful restructuring of the regulatory and policy-making system as we are about the design of schools.

The times are ripe for change. Plenty of other people are echoing

the same concerns that we in the Coalition have. In many quarters, though by no means all, the notion of restructuring is "in." More people now accept that no two good schools are ever quite alike, that schools must reflect the best of their communities and the particular, autonomous energy of their own faculties. The main stream, at least in reform rhetoric, has shifted in our direction.

When people talk about "accountability" these days, they are generally directing the word solely at the schools. But we must keep in mind that all of us are accountable for change, each in our own way—governors, legislators, university folk, union leaders, and the rest. The attitudes and expectations that undergird our schools' designs belong to all of us. Good schools are complicated places, necessarily and rightfully so. The extent to which the political and educational establishment understands this and honors it is the extent to which we will "account" wisely for the work that our students and teachers do. □



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