



CENTER FOR EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY

Empowering Parents to Choose Their Child's Educational Opportunity

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For American families and students today, education can provide a pathway to realizing their aspirations and dignity. Right now, our Nation's education system arguably achieves neither. Most American families are dependent on the public school system, which is influenced by a complex intersection of unions, federal, state, and local politicians and bureaucrats. Education is not the one-size-fits-all model endorsed by Washington, D.C. The America First Policy Institute's (AFPI) goal is to challenge the current education agenda and fight to advance educational opportunities for all American families. This means putting parents and students in charge of the education of America's next generation. AFPI aims to restore our high-quality public education to its original, legitimate purpose: educating and raising the next generation of Americans, facilitating their dreams—and our Nation's prosperity.



WHERE IS AMERICA NOW

Efforts in Education Reform:

Our education system is the foundation of our economy, society, and democracy. Numerous attempts to reform public education have ensued over the past several decades and have proven to be largely ineffective, as shown below. Fifty-five years ago, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was enacted and aimed to close the gaps between disadvantaged and advantaged children giving every student a fair start regardless of their family's income and zip code. Since that time, public spending on elementary and secondary schools has reached \$700 billion annually ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2020](#)). Per-student spending, adjusted for inflation, has more than doubled from \$4,943 in 1970 to \$12,783 in 2019 ([U.S. Department of Education, 2020](#)). For decades, the public school system model has continued to yield inadequate performance and an increased achievement gap for disadvantaged children. There have been many reform efforts in the last 20 years including, [A Nation at Risk](#) published in 1983 and The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Sadly, the children targeted for these reforms and increased spending efforts are still falling behind. This study highlights the persistent failure of the K-12 education system ([Stevens, 2020](#)).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is known as the “Nations Report Card.” NAEP is a nationally standardized assessment of student achievement. The test is administered biannually to fourth and eighth-grade students nationwide to measure math and reading proficiency. The scores are reported as a percentage of students who scored as advanced, proficient, and basic. A recent study analyzed the results of eighth-grade achievement in math and reading from 2003-2017. The study found that there were no gains in achievement scores of eighth-grade students in reading and math over the 14-year time frame. The analysis also noted that in 36 states and the District of Columbia, one-third of the low-income eighth-graders scored below basic in reading. The dismal results for math revealed that more than one-half of low-income eighth-grade students in nine states scored below basic.

Education is the compilation and product of many and varied resources. Among these, teachers stand out as a key to reaching the high standards that are increasingly emphasized in education reform. There are over 3.7 million teachers in the United States, and among the many effective teachers throughout the country, 128,550 have achieved elite recognition by being certified as exemplary by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2020](#)) ([National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2021](#)). Although effective teachers remain the most important in-school factor for student learning, students are still falling behind. Another education reform effort was the 2010 release of the Common Core Standards, which cost over \$80 billion to implement. To date, there is no evidence that the standards had a significant impact on student achievement. Even worse, a 2019 federally-funded study by the Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning found that the standards had negative effects on student performance ([Pioneer Institute, 2020](#)). According to NAEP, 65 percent of fourth-graders in the United States are not proficient in reading, and 59 percent are not proficient



in math. A recent study of America's millennials, ages 26-40, revealed that 50 percent of these workers could not apply literacy and math skills in the workplace ([Goodman, Sands, & Coley, 2015](#)). These results show that our Nation's students continue to fall behind, and the top-down approach to standards of the last 20 years is failing our students, families, and economy.

Impact of COVID-19:

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the best and the worst of the U.S. education system. In March 2020, a majority of U.S. public schools closed their doors, and districts were forced to redesign operations for 56.4 million students to provide remote instruction, many of which could not do so effectively ([Bucchino, 2020](#)). Parents, schools, and teachers were unprepared and untrained to handle the complexities inherent to educating and the demands of the technology needed to support students ([Black, Ferdig, & Thompson, 2021](#)). An April 2020 study by the U.S. Census Bureau study found that 4.4 million households with students still lacked consistent access to a computer, and 3.7 million households lacked internet access ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2020](#)). For the 2020-2021 school year, over 50 percent of public schools began remotely ([The White House, 2020a](#)), which created vast disruptions in education progress for students, especially in adversely impacted communities. By December 2020, one study found that 60 percent of private school students were receiving in-person instruction, while only 24 percent of traditional public-school students were ([Henderson, Peterson, & West, 2020](#)).

Evidence shows missing school for a prolonged period affects student achievement. AFPI calculations estimates, based on Angrist and Krueger ([1991](#)) that COVID-19 school closures may lead to a reduction of \$1,900 to \$2,700 in average lifetime earnings per year. We also know that in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, it took public schools nearly 2 years to make up for lost ground in instructional time ([Harris & Larson, 2019](#)). With so many public-school students lacking access to technology and in-person instruction, the pandemic widened the achievement gap among students. In a study entitled *The Covid Slide*, it was estimated that learning in reading gains would be 70 percent of that of a typical school year. In math, students would have less than 50 percent of learning gains in a normal year ([Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020](#)). A study released in March 2021 by Stanford University provides evidence about basic reading skills in elementary-age students. The results of first through fourth graders nationwide show a decline in reading skills. Second and third graders were most affected and are now 30 percent behind where they would be in a typical year. In early, formative school years, students, especially in third and fourth grade, learn to read. Being behind in these grades can significantly affect the future success ([Domingue, Hough, Lange, & Yeatman, 2021](#)).

Before COVID-19, 65 percent of fourth-graders were not proficient in reading, and 59 percent were not performing at grade level in math ([The Nation's Report Card, 2019](#)). Research in early literacy has proven that a significant relationship exists between graduation rates and the ability to read by third grade. Third graders who are not reading at grade level are likely to drop out of school later ([Weyer & Casares, 2019](#)). Many states have enacted legislation to



help address the issue of early literacy. Most notably, after passing the Literacy-Based Promotion Act in 2013, Mississippi was the only state in the Nation to post significant gains on the fourth-grade reading test as measured by the ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2021](#)). Now, more than ever, with the learning loss caused by school closures due to COVID-19, states need a literacy plan and policies to help the youngest learners ([Fuchs-Schundeln, 2021](#)). The National Council on Teacher Quality recommends that elementary teachers understand and know how to teach the five components of reading science: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension ([National Council on Teacher Quality, 2020](#)). States need policies in place to help with early screenings for young children. The science of teaching reading has evolved significantly over the years. Policies that re-train teachers have been found to be successful, as well as interventions to assist struggling readers ([ExcelinEd, 2020](#)).

What has also become clear over the last year are the tremendous consequences closures have on special needs and minority students. Students with special needs were twice as likely to receive little to no remote learning. Low-income or minority students are disproportionately affected by school closures, with Hispanic, Black, and low-income students each losing almost a year of learning ([The White House, 2020b](#)). According to a June ([2020](#)) McKinsey report, nearly 1.1 million high school students will drop out and, and we know to date that an estimated 3 million students have disengaged from the education system—a result of remote learning ([Korman, O’Keefe & Repka, 2020](#)). While the most recent national dropout data has yet to be released, CNN reports that “evidence from across the country shows steep declines in attendance, a rising number of failing grades, and shrinking enrollment” ([McMorris-Santoro, 2021](#)). One example is the evidence found in the largest public school system in the United States, Fairfax County Public Schools. Research on middle and high school students in Fairfax Public Schools found that the achievement gap between students has widened during the pandemic school year 2020 ([Fairfax County Public Schools, 2020](#)). Of the over 5,000 students in the study, those who were already falling behind in their grades before the pandemic fell even further behind in the first quarter of this year. More students in Fairfax County were failing during the first quarter than in any previous normal years. The inverse was true as well. Students who were performing above average before the pandemic performed slightly better during the first quarter of this year. This pattern was consistent among all students in the district. The potential long-term effect of school closures may become more evident as time passes and students who have been remote or partially return full time ([Fuchs-Schundeln, 2021](#)).

School closures also have had a deep impact on parents and households. In 2019, out of 33.4 million families with children under 18, 91.3 percent of all households—both single and married-couple homes—had at least one employed parent. Among those households, 97.5 percent of married couples with children had at least one employed parent ([U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2020](#)). In August 2020, when many schools continued to remain closed for in-person learning, The White House Council of Economic Advisors calculated that about 5.6 million parents would be unable to return to work if closures were perpetuated. Earlier, we noted that there is a significant loss of earnings for students as a result of school closures.



There is a similar effect that could be had on those estimated 5.6 million parents—nearly \$232 billion of earnings losses collectively ([The White House, 2020](#)). Closures also have a disproportionate effect on women’s workforce participation. From February 2020 to February 2021, a net 2.4 million women left the labor force ([U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2021](#)). In previous recessions, women who dropped out of the workforce to care for their kids often struggled to return, unable to find a job in their previous role or draw the same wage ([Silva and Miranda, 2021](#)). These school closures were exacerbated by the absence of school choice, leaving parents with no recourse if their children happened to go to a traditional public school that did not offer an adequate educational environment during the pandemic or otherwise.

Remote learning and school closures, due to the pandemic, exemplify the importance of education choice and the need to give parents the opportunity to determine what is best for their child. Zip codes and backgrounds should not determine a child’s future. Charter Schools, private schools, tax-credit scholarships, education savings accounts, open enrollment, micro schools, magnet schools, and career academies are helping to redesign public education with parents at the forefront of the decision-making. Scaling up choice in education across the Nation can increase accountability of providers, reduce opportunity gaps for our more vulnerable students, and improve the quality of education for all children. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to address the health concerns that meet the needs of all families. A school choice system is a more promising way to meet the unique educational and social needs of children along with the differing health needs of students and their families.

Benefits of Education Choice:

A wide range of studies finds that education choice programs can improve academic outcomes for students participating in a school of their choice and students remaining in traditional public schools. Why? Traditional public schools face incentives to improve their quality of education due to the accountability that school choice provides. Some metrics that show improvement include increased rates of high school graduation and college degree attainment, more school diversity, better civic knowledge and engagement, and reduced taxpayer costs ([The White House, 2020](#)) ([EdChoice, 2020](#)). Today, 33 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C., have school choice options for students.

The first private school choice program in the Nation was enacted in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1990. This program now includes 27,857 students at 126 private schools ([Chingos et al., 2019](#)). A study of this program indicated that the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program students experience a higher high school graduation rate and the likelihood of enrolling in higher education. Additionally, researchers found that these students, on average, had lower criminal history rates ([DeAngelis & Wolf, 2020](#)). Another study in North Carolina found similar results. High-risk, low-income students that win the school choice lottery experience about a “50 percent reduction in the measures of criminal activity that weight crimes by their severity,” and black males were primarily affected. ([Deming, 2012](#)).



The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance also found supportive evidence on the benefits of school choice—education choice can positively affect educational attainment. The Washington, D.C., voucher program high school graduation rates increased by 21 points for students in the program ([Wolf et al., 2010a](#)). Additional evidence has also shown that upon graduating from a school of one's choice, future earnings can be boosted by \$2,347 per year ([Booker et al., 2014](#))—leading to a more prosperous future.

A well-known, successful school choice program is the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program, which was established in 2001 by the Florida legislature. The program offers state tax credits to corporations that donate to nonprofit scholarship-funding organizations. The scholarships can be used for tuition and fees at private schools or transportation to a public school outside a student's residential school district. For the 2020-2021 school year, over 100,000 students were participating in the program and over 1,900 private schools as of February 2021 ([Florida Department of Education, 2021](#)). Commitments like Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship Program can vastly improve a child's pathway to success.

A persuasive body of evidence points to the benefits of school choice on a broad range of student outcomes. A 2021 study titled [Is More School Choice Associated with Higher State-Level Performance on the NAEP?](#) by the University of Arkansas created an Education Freedom Index, which presents the rankings of the 50 states plus D.C. The index is comprised of education freedom measurements regarding the availability and accessibility of private, charter, homeschool, and public-school choices. The researchers found that higher levels of education freedom are significantly associated with higher NAEP achievement levels across the entire state. In this study, Arizona leads the Nation in overall freedom, with Minnesota in second place. The state with the least overall freedom was found to be Hawaii, with West Virginia in second place ([Wolf et al., 2021](#)).

Interestingly, the interaction of public school and school choice yielded positive academic outcomes for all students ([Wolf et al., 2021](#)). States with more school choice and education freedom yielded higher achievement scores for students from a range of backgrounds in both public and private schools ([The White House, 2020](#)). The accountability created by school choice has been shown in multiple contexts to yield positive academic outcomes for the whole education system, as stated above.

Effective teachers are a vital part of the educational system and play a crucial role in how well students learn. In addition to giving families more flexibility, school choice provides greater instructional freedom to teachers as they pursue high standards. For over 25 years, charter school leaders have been working on redesigning schools to be more flexible to meet the needs of students in the modern world. Charter schools are not required to report to government regulations and operate independently under contract with the authorizing board ([All Education Schools.com, 2021](#)). Charter School instructors have the freedom to accommodate all different learning styles, change the curriculum, incorporate specific student interests, and develop lesson plans that meet the educational goals of the schools. Much like distance learning helped to provide flexibility for public schools during the



pandemic, charter schools have been personalizing learning for students through innovative curriculum and environments that are best for their students. Now is the time to look at where our public schools failed parents and students over the last year. We must determine how we can ensure that students and parents are never held hostage by the complex, arguably bureaucratic, and in any instanced unionized public-school systems, that parents are given the power to choose the best educational opportunity, and that our school systems are responsive to the needs of students.

As the evidence above states, our most underserved students suffer the consequences of poor education policies supported by many government bureaucrats and union leadership—hindering greater student outcomes. Far too many public schools remained closed while students in non-public education systems were given the opportunity to return to school ([Henderson, Peterson, & West, 2020](#)). When America first institutionalized our public education system over a century ago, the goal was to ensure opportunity for all Americans, rich or poor—traditionally the prerogative of families rather than government ([Cubberley, 1919](#)). Since then, the education system has begun to de-emphasize the instruction of fundamental skills for success with moral instruction based on social justice ideologies ([The President’s Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021, p. 35-37](#))

Importance of Expanding Academic Educational Opportunities:

Automation and technology are rapidly changing the world of work, and businesses in all industries are increasingly demanding a more technical and skilled workforce. Advancing education opportunities include increasing access to high-quality computer science (CS) and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs for American students of all backgrounds, especially women and minorities. Today, 67 percent of all new jobs in STEM are in computing. Computer science, however, only makes up 11 percent of STEM bachelor’s degrees ([Code.org, 2020](#)). We know that today only 47 percent of K-12 schools teach computer science courses, yet 90 percent of parents want their child to study it ([Code.org, CSTA, & ECEP Alliance, 2020c, p.14](#)). There is also significant value in learning computer science and pursuing a higher education degree in this subject area. The lifetime earnings of a typical high school graduate who took computer science are \$.77 million, and students who pursue a higher education degree in computer science have lifetime earnings of \$1.99 million ([Brookings Institution, 2018](#)). In comparison to other college degrees, computer science majors can earn 40 percent more with their degrees ([Code.org, 2020](#)). While female and minority participation increased over the last 5 years—20 percent in 2014 to 29 percent in 2019—we must continue to focus our efforts on expanding their participation ([Code.org, CSTA, & ECEP Alliance, 2020d, p. 19-20](#)).

The future of work impacts the next generation of workers. Destigmatizing vocational education is critical to building multiple pathways that provide opportunities for success and upward mobility for all American students and future workers. High-quality vocational education programs across every high school in America could increase work-based learning across all industries, not just in the building and trades. ([Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2004](#)) ([Arum & Yossi, 1995](#)) ([Oakes, 1983](#)). Also, prioritizing Career and Technical Education



funding, like the Trump Administration championed, has the potential to increase youth employment and reduce financial barriers within higher education ([National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020](#)) ([The White House, 2020](#)).

WHY AFPI IS ESSENTIAL

Our education system is not serving students and families in a consistently effective manner, which is unacceptable. Many good teachers want to do better for their students and have many innovative ideas to help. Some of these same teachers are constrained by the culture of their school, federal and state requirements, and a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction ([Stevens, 2020](#)). AFPI understands the sense of urgency to improve our schools and advocate for bold reforms.

Every parent should have the opportunity to choose high-quality education for their children—the gateway to fulfilling the American dream. Arguably, over the last year, we have seen why education choice is so critical. The results cited above show families with a choice have better results and better education. The long-term economic effects of school closures and lack of choice for parents will have tremendous consequences on students across this Nation. In fact, parents largely agree with this sentiment. In a recent poll completed by the American Federation for Children, they found the following ([2021](#)):

- 71 percent of voters support school choice
- 65 percent of parents support having access to some of the funding used per student for home, virtual, or private education

The above polling numbers mention the cost of funding per student, which in the United States is averaged at \$14,660 per student in the 2020-21 school year ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2021](#)). The current system funds schools rather than students. School choice ensures that the student funding of \$14,660 goes to the parents to pay for the school of their choice for their child. In the case of school closings, the parents would then have options to make changes that meet the needs of their family. During a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, parents need flexibility and options, and students deserve to be in the setting that works best for them.

In addition to advancing school choice across the Nation, AFPI is dedicated to fostering well-researched, strategic, and comprehensive state literacy plans, focusing on children starting from an early age through high school. There is a critical need for implementing reading skills as soon as children begin school, thus creating greater student outcomes throughout a child's time in the classroom and beyond. AFPI's efforts will focus on research and developing policies that bring parents to the table, teachers the support, and students the resources to bolster reading skills and detect the lack thereof early on.



AFPI's Center for Education Opportunity is working to answer the call to support every American family and student to pursue their desired educational opportunity and to obtain a high-quality education. Doing so not only means researching effective solutions to advance the best policies that achieve these solutions but also provides insights into the successful work of the previous 4 years in bolstering CS and STEM education policies. Inclusive, high-quality, and accessible CS and STEM programs for students of all backgrounds are imperative as we prepare for the changing nature of work, especially as a result of COVID-19. Since 2017, more than \$600 million has been funded for CS and STEM programs ([The White House, 2017](#)). An additional \$300 million was leveraged from the private sector thanks to the leadership of the Trump Administration for calling on the private sector to match what the federal government was doing ([Stych, 2017](#)). There are 37 states that have adopted K-12 computer science standards—up from only six states in early 2017 ([Code.org, CSTA, & ECEP Alliance, 2020a, p. 25](#)). Additionally, 20 states now require all high schools to offer computer science courses ([Code.org, CSTA, & ECEP Alliance, 2020b, p. 30](#))—a significant increase from four states in 2017. Significant strides have been made in the last 3 years, but there is more work to be done. AFPI will cultivate strategic policies and pathways that continue to enable greater student outcomes through CS and STEM education programs that create opportunities and generate multiple pathways for future upward mobility. It is AFPI's mission and intention to rethink education and put hardworking American families and students first, especially at the root of our education system.

BUILDING ON A TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA

In his 1984 convention speech, President Ronald Reagan said, “Choice in education is no mere abstraction. Like its economic cousin, free enterprise, and its political cousin, democracy, it affords hope and opportunity.” Building upon President Reagan's legacy and vision for the expansion of educational opportunities, AFPI is focused on advancing opportunities that will rethink and restore our educational system putting American families and students at the core of that mission.

Since the late 1980s, the United States has taken strides to increase valuable educational opportunities, but our country is at an inflection point, and we must do more to ensure educational choice is provided to every family and each student is given every opportunity to succeed. During the Trump Administration, there was critical funding and policymaking that gave American families and students of all backgrounds a hopeful future. AFPI will build on this foundation by researching and developing policies that ensure every American parent can choose the best education for their child, thus creating greater student outcomes, yielding multiple pathways to opportunity, and preparing our children for future upward mobility. States such as Florida, Indiana, and Georgia have prioritized policies and funding to advance educational opportunities that enable children in their state to have access to the best tools for success and to achieve the American Dream ([Ceballos & Wright, 2021](#)) ([American Federation for Children, 2021](#)).



President Reagan laid the groundwork for much of the educational opportunities that we see today, like Washington D.C.'s successful school-choice voucher program ([Izumi, 2013](#)). As previously mentioned, this voucher program has led to increased high school graduation rates by 21 points for students in the program ([Wolf et al., 2010b](#)). In July 2020, the Trump Administration dedicated \$85 million to support adversely affected students in Washington, D.C., to expand their educational opportunities and their ability to participate in the district's successful school-choice voucher program ([U.S. Department of Education, 2020](#)).

More than ever before, the need to expand educational opportunities is critical. In December 2020, President Trump signed an executive order on Expanding Educational Opportunity Through School Choice ([2020](#)), which allowed the Department of Health and Human Services to allocate Community Services Block Grant funds, a total of nearly \$1.7 billion in fiscal 2020, to scholarships and tuition for parents that wanted to send their child to a school offering in-person learning or more opportunities. Additionally, the first and second Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act allocated \$113 billion to education and states across the Nation. As school closures continue to perpetuate based on the advocacy of some influential unions and politicians ([Levine, 2021](#)), the Biden Administration has required states to develop and submit plans for spending their share of the \$123 billion reserved for K-12 education by June 7, 2021, which was funded in the most recent package ([Jordan, 2021](#)). These states must include plans to safely reopen schools, assessments of learning loss, and pathways to help disadvantaged students. States must seek input from students, educators, and community groups in developing those plans. Spending plans are also to be included ([U.S. Department of Education, 2021](#)).

AFPI will collaborate with states assisting with advancing educational opportunities across the country that put the American family and student first. Through experience, research, and education, the Institute will build upon these transformational actions so that every child can achieve the American Dream. "If we can put a man on the moon, dig out the Panama Canal and win two world wars, then I have no doubt that we as a nation can provide school choice [opportunities] to every disadvantaged child in America" ([President Donald Trump, 2016](#)).

POLICY PRIORITIES

As the American people emerge from the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis, it is our duty as Americans to protect the future of this great Nation, our children, and their pathway to prosperity. The AFPI Center for Education Opportunity is putting the expansion of American educational opportunities at the root of our mission to reform our Nation's current education system. AFPI will research and develop policies that provide education opportunities starting at the local and state levels of government while driving the conversation at the federal level. We will do this by:



Increasing Education Opportunities

- Provide evidence-based insights to states about how they can best pursue school choice policies that enhance educational outcomes for parents and students
- Research and develop strategies that hold state leaders and schools accountable for providing high-quality education
- Ensure that students in historically distressed communities have access to high-quality education opportunities

Increasing Early Literacy

- Develop comprehensive state early literacy plans to ensure students have the foundational reading skills they need to succeed:
 - AFPI will assist states in advancing policies and procedures to ensure early detection of reading deficiencies occur within the first month of school entry.
 - AFPI will develop intensive strategies to help struggling students get the interventions needed to improve reading proficiency.

Creating Greater Student Outcomes

- Advance critical and necessary programs and courses preparing American students for future success, such as vocational education, computer science, and STEM
- Maintain or reinstate programs that go beyond the one-size-fits-all model and that benefit gifted students, average students, and students with special learning needs
- Identify successful state-level reforms that have helped improve the teaching profession and student outcomes

Improving Spending on Education

- Provide transparency regarding the flow of education dollars and its relationship to quality educational outcomes for students
- Ensure funding directly impacts students
- Raise awareness about existing federal, state, and local funds that can be better spent to help produce high-quality education choices and increased opportunity for all American students

The AFPI Center for Education Opportunity is focused on advancing opportunities that will restore our educational system, putting American families and students at the forefront of our mission. It is putting the American family and student first by educating parents, state, and local leadership on the importance of expanding educational opportunities and programs, by advocating for policies that make tangible reforms to our education system, and by creating greater outcomes for America's future.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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