Developing Leadership Excellence

The Center for Applied Policy in Education (CAP-Ed), founded within the University of California, Davis School of Education in 2006, is committed to building the leadership capacity of educators throughout California in order to develop a more equitable education system statewide. Our driving vision is an educational system in which district and school leaders create the conditions so that all students can learn, thrive, and grow. In keeping with the School of Education’s strategic plan, CAP-Ed is deeply committed to educational equity and social justice, focused on building partnerships and collaborative approaches to research, and working to inform and support effective educational policy.

CAP-Ed’s networks have served hundreds of district superintendents, principals, and teachers from across California. From Fortuna, in the most northern region of the state, to San Diego County, CAP-Ed has partnered with hundreds of educational leaders in order to bolster targeted, effective, and sustainable leadership that supports equity and student achievement.

Leading major statewide partnerships in K–12 education for the UC Davis School of Education, the overall goal of CAP-Ed’s efforts is to evaluate and build capacity for systems leadership that positions teaching and learning at the center of all district work.

The UC Davis School of Education’s Strategic Plan identifies “developing and strengthening existing partnerships with educational institutions” as a key component of realizing the School’s mission. CAP-Ed bridges research and practice in meaningful and deeply impactful ways and is central to achieving our school’s partnership goals.

Our Two Strategic Pillars

1. School and District Leadership and Development
2. Leveraging Policy and Research

Our Moral Imperative

To directly support district and school leaders to build and sustain an education system grounded in educational equity and social justice which create the conditions that allow all students to learn, thrive and grow.
District Leadership Development

The UC Davis Center for Applied Policy in Education connects education policymakers and practitioners from across California to collaboratively align research, practice, and policy. CAP-Ed’s mission is to support equitable education systems that are grounded in empirical research and effective leadership that leads to improved educational outcomes for California’s diverse K–12 students.


Superintendents’ Executive Leadership Forum (SELF)

The SELF program, now in its 15th year, supports collaborative and inquiry-based development of superintendent leadership capacity. Guiding and supporting superintendents using a systems lens, SELF focuses district leadership on the improvement of teaching and learning through an integrated approach to governance, equity, instructional leadership, and novel approaches to leadership capacity building at all levels of the system.

Each year’s cohort of 12–18 superintendents is recruited to participate in the SELF program by their CAP-Ed colleagues and peers. Selection criteria is designed to achieve a diverse cohort of superintendents from large and small, urban, suburban, and rural school districts. SELF provides participants the opportunity to engage in discussions about critical educational issues with educational systems experts and superintendent colleagues in a unique, intimate University setting.

At the end of each year, SELF alumni superintendents are invited to join the California Superintendents Collaborative Network at UC Davis.

During 2021–22, this highly collaborative forum provided superintendents a valuable platform to work through the many challenges educators faced in light of the pandemic. Guest faculty and topics included:

- Dr. Steve Ladd
  Systems Leadership

- Davis Campbell
  Board Governance

- Dr. Michael Fullan
  Systems Transformation

- Dr. Meredith Honig
  Central Office Transformation & Principal Leadership

- Dr. Charles Payne
  Equity and Dignity-based Education

1. Board Governance
2. Systems Transformation
3. Central Office Transformation & Principal Leadership
4. Equity and Dignity-based Education
Superintendent leadership is critical for developing and shaping school district systems to focus on equity, cultivate collaborative cultures, focus direction, secure accountability and deepen learning for all students. The Superintendents’ Executive Leadership Forum and California Superintendents Collaborative Network build superintendents’ instructional leadership skills to work effectively with district colleagues in ensuring high quality, equitable student outcomes throughout their districts. The annual series of collaborative sessions build collaborative relationships among participating superintendents and create opportunities for them to learn from each other, and from other experts, as they delve into district problems of practice. Member superintendents center equity in their actions and decisions; how they frame equity and root causes of inequity is part of effectively applying a systems lens to district leadership.

California Superintendents Collaborative Network

The Network is focused on four major areas:

1. Place teaching and learning at the center of the district’s work
2. Build system coherence, organizational capacity, and professional and collaborative learning cultures
3. Connect and support colleagues around instructional practice to address educational inequities
4. Focus on leadership and the district as the unit of change

31 school district superintendents enrolled in 2021–2022
335,446 students were served by superintendents in the Network program in 2021–2022
14 school district superintendent problems of practice were presented and explored in Network sessions during 2021–2022
Research suggests that in successful districts, superintendents set direction and exercise influence even as they empower principals to develop their own leadership capacity. Since the programs’ inception fifteen years ago, superintendents in California have more widely embraced the need for effective systems leadership with a focus on the role of the principal, the instructional core and governance that supports central office leadership. More than 230 district superintendents have participated in SELF since 2008 and the programs superintendent cohorts include 50–60 superintendents, annually. The work of SELF guest faculty has had far-reaching effects on the field of education reform in California and spun off multiple projects in school districts that emulate the work established by CAP-Ed.

Effective professional development for district leaders is collaborative, based in inquiry, applicable to real world issues and necessary to decrease isolation and increase research-based decisions. Time is the currency of district leaders, so programs that support them must be meaningful, applicable and guided by seasoned professionals. And too few education researchers have direct lines of contact with district leaders. District leaders are interested in applying their professional learning to their district systems in order to build leadership capacity that is energizing, deliberate and focused on equitable educational outcomes through effective teaching with teachers collaborating as an essential support for the system. Principals are also pivotal in this.

“Certainly, my leadership has evolved over the course of my experiences with the Network. It really is about learning from each other and then reflecting and applying the learnings in a meaningful way within our own systems.”

Network Superintendent

Tanya Leiberman, Lead Consultant, Assembly Education Committee.

My view of leadership has been influenced by my participation in SELF. As a result, we have incorporated system conversations with classified and certificated personnel at all levels, creating continuity throughout the district and highlighting each person’s role for improving outcomes for students.”

SELF Superintendent

(Clockwise from top left) Ziggy Robeson, Ripon USD; Shawn Tennenbaum, San Benito HSD; Todd Cutler, Lake Tahoe USD; Joey Adame, Los Molinos USD.
Leading Statewide Educational Change

Superintendents’ Executive Leadership Forum (SELF) and California Superintendents Collaborative Network (Network) Cohorts, 2021–2022

Superintendents representing California school districts from as far north as Fortuna and as far south as San Diego are actively engaged in district-wide leadership development that results in impactful, real-world student improvement.

### SELF AT UC DAVIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Superintendent</th>
<th>District Size</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cloverdale USD</td>
<td>Sonoma</td>
<td>Betha MacClain</td>
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<td>Mountain View SD</td>
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<td>Placer</td>
<td>John Becker</td>
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<td>Alameda</td>
<td>Daryl Camp</td>
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<td>Sunnyvale SD</td>
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<td>Michael Gallagher</td>
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<td>Western Placer USD</td>
<td>Placer</td>
<td>Kerry Callahan</td>
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### UC DAVIS NETWORK

<table>
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<th>Location</th>
<th>Superintendent</th>
<th>District Size</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aromas-San Juan USD</td>
<td>San Benito</td>
<td>Michele Huntoon</td>
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<td>Mark Campbell</td>
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<td>Glen Senestraro</td>
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<td>8,320</td>
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<td>Kyla Johnson-Trammell</td>
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<td>Ziggy Robeson</td>
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<td>Sacramento City USD</td>
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<td>Jorge Aguilar</td>
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<td>San Benito HSD</td>
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<td>Travis USD</td>
<td>Solano</td>
<td>Pam Conkin</td>
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<td>William Spalding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yolo COE</td>
<td>Yolo</td>
<td>Garth Lewis</td>
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### UC SAN DIEGO NETWORK

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<td>Arcadia USD</td>
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<td>David Vannasdal</td>
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<td>Centralia ESD</td>
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<td>Norma Martinez</td>
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<td>Coronado USD</td>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>Karl Mueller</td>
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<td>Eastside Union ESD</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>Josh Lightle</td>
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<td>Encinitas USD</td>
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<td>Andree Grey</td>
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<td>Escondido Union SD</td>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>Luis Rankins-Ibarra</td>
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<td>Temecula USD</td>
<td>Riverside</td>
<td>Jodi McClay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vista USD</td>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>Matt Doyle</td>
<td>24,198</td>
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</tbody>
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| La Mesa-Spring Valley USD | San Diego | David Feliciano | 12,400 |
In 2021–22, CAP-Ed collaborated with 44 superintendents from school districts serving over 422,000 students statewide.

“I have learned from others in the room, both presenters and participants. It is always good to hear different perspectives on common themes of work.”

SELF Superintendent
California Institute for School Improvement (CISI)

Education policy is continually being updated, and these changes affect the curriculum and instructional work of all schools in California. CISI supports education leaders by organizing the flow of information on critical issues in education and distributing it in a concise, monthly resource digest.

Distributed to nearly 2,800 administrators from over 600 school districts in California, the monthly CISI e-bulletin summarizes and synthesizes education research and policy that informs policymaking and policy implementation, providing the timely information that leaders need as they perform their day-to-day work in schools.

CISI also brings leaders together through bi-annual workshops to reflect on experiences, share and discuss ideas, and collaborate on improving education at the district and state level.

Launched in the 1970s by Davis Campbell, who at the time served as the Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction and currently serves on the CISI Advisory Board, CISI became a part of CAP-Ed in 2012.

“Through new relationships, collaboration, and experienced presenters, I felt an increase in confidence and an ability to prioritize my work.”

Network Superintendent

Local Control and Accountability Plans

In April of 2022, CAP-Ed Executive Director, Christina Murdoch, presented a paper on her study of California education reform policy at the American Educational Researcher’s Association Annual Conference in San Diego, California. The paper session also included presentations by colleagues from South Africa, Brazil and Chile. As part of California’s 2013 school finance reform, school districts must now develop Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) to identify programs districts will implement to improve students’ educational outcomes. Using mixed methods, we compare the LCAPS of 26 relatively high-performing districts to those of 25 relatively low-performing districts with similar demographics. Among the 45 programs we identify in district LCAPS, we find very few areas where the prevalence of specific programs is higher in relatively high-performing districts. Yet, a few differences emerge. According to the LCAPs, high performing school districts commonly provide professional development to teachers and administrators, develop instructional systems to support student learning and focus on low-income students. Conversely, low performing districts focus more on counseling, behavioral supports and family engagement. 45 programs were identified as focal areas of unduplicated supplemental and concentration grant funding. Only a few were found to be statistically significantly different: professional development and the instructional system.
Bavarian Parliament Delegation Visits UC Davis

On the afternoon of Monday, May 2, 2022, eleven members of Bavarian Parliament joined CAP-Ed Executive Director, Christina E. Murdoch, and colleagues, to discuss California education policy, school district leadership and creating equity in schools. Education experts from the CAP-Ed team included Dr. Steve Ladd, CAP-Ed Policy Fellow; Davis Campbell, CAP-Ed Senior Policy Fellow and School of Education Advisory Board member; Dr. Tom Timar, Professor Emeritus; Dr. Heather Rose, Professor. UC Davis campus partners included UC Davis Chancellor Gary S. May; Vice Provost and Associate Chancellor of Global Affairs, Michael Lazzara; and Associate Vice Provost Global Education for All, Dr. Nancy Erbstein.

Some of the topics that we discussed and explored:

- What does effective education policy look like in California, in the U.S., in Germany?
- What is the role of education in society?
- How do we measure success in schools?
- What is the role of the superintendency?
- Well-being, mental health (SEL)

“As the number one instructional coach in my district, as a result of the Network, I am able to provide increased opportunities for the development of a broader global view regarding systems.”

Network Superintendent
Lessons Learned Research Project

In 2021–2022, CAP-Ed launched a major research project to capture and share the important leadership and organizational lessons of the Superintendents’ Executive Leadership (SELF) and the California Superintendents Collaborative Network, Fall 2008 – Spring 2023. Additionally, the main objective of the documentation and sharing of learning from the California Principals Support Network (CAPS) program will be to synthesize the program evaluation reports, interview participants, analyze Action Plans and write up the findings and lessons learned to inform the field.

Superintendent Leadership Programs

More than 20% of California school districts have engaged with the systems work led by the Center for Applied Policy in Education in partnership with leading education researchers including Michael Fullan, Meredith Honig, Peter Senge, Anthony Bryk, Carl Cohn, Norton Grubb, David Cohen, Richard Elmore, Patricia Gandara, Charles Payne, James Popham, Marguerite Roza and Larry Cuban through SELF and the California Superintendents Collaborative Network.

CAP-Ed’s unwavering focus has been on equity and school reform via systems change, instructional improvement and connecting superintendents and school leaders to empirical research and policy analysis. The main objective of the documentation and sharing of learning from the Superintendents’ Executive Leadership (SELF) and California Superintendents Collaborative Network program will be to synthesize the program evaluation reports and write up the findings and lessons learned to inform the field. Dr. Janet Chrispeels’ evaluation reports will form the basis for the work. We will produce one case study that will illustrate the way in which involvement in the program unfolded in a school to shift leadership practice. Following is a draft research plan for this portion of the proposal.

Research Questions

In what ways do networks of superintendents do the following:

1. Reflect understandings of district systems that impact equity and factors that enhance or impede equity?
2. Implement a systems approach to address problems of practice (POPs) and theories of action to lead change in participating districts?
3. Create coherence through the development and analysis of case studies to strategically address equity and improve student educational outcomes?

“This [SELF] was such a valuable opportunity. I appreciated the challenge to think on a variety of topics. After many years of being in the business, it was exciting to be challenged and see things a little differently.”

SELF Superintendent

(Top) Terry Chevalier-Metzger, Denair USD; Matt Best, Davis JUSD.
Project’s Significance

Superintendent professional development is a highly visible, politically sensitive, legally complex and evolving arena. Despite the potential of superintendents as levers of systemic change, there is little research about how superintendents learn to effectively engage stakeholders across the system to address equity-centered problems of practice (POPs). We seek to address this gap by exploring how SELF and the collaborative superintendents network leads to superintendents being agents of change, leaders of equity-centered school improvement.

Analysis of superintendent case studies developed over 7 years in a professional development network of superintendents across 50 school districts representing more than 1,000,000 K–12 students. Our research explores how a professional, inquiry-based network supports and develops superintendent leadership to implement district-wide, equity-centered change, and what we can learn from superintendents’ attempts to lead change in their districts. Our work will contribute a deeper understanding of superintendents’ efforts to center equity in district leadership actions and decisions, as well as how superintendents frame equity and root causes of inequity.

Furthermore, equity policies as systems challenges call for education leaders, often portrayed as agents of social reproduction, to become mediators of social change. Importantly, what school leaders believe about learning and equity has been shown to profoundly impact their efficacy as change leaders.

“There is no blueprint for systemic equity work that permeates every facet of the organizational culture,” which means district leaders must take calculated risks to chart new paths and learn collaboratively as they go.

Research Methods and Data Analysis: Data Sources, Qualitative & Case Study Analysis

Ninety Superintendents Network case studies from a diverse sample of urban, rural and suburban districts across California; superintendent interviews, session feedback. Initial analyses suggest that 75% of case studies attend to POPs directly related to equity.

The following goals remain consistent in CAP-Ed’s programs:

- Increased collaboration between teachers and administrators
- Increased equity in participating systems
- Use of common formative assessments
- More tier 1 supports in classrooms
- More effective use of data to drive instruction
- Alignment between principal’s perception and teacher’s perception of school culture

In the upcoming year, our priority will be to provide relevant, applied learning opportunities for those enrolled in our leadership programs while documenting the impact and learning associated as is evidenced in districts and schools. One insight of the past year is the importance of collaborative learning sessions as the backbone of professional relationships. We will seek to study, document and record the impact of collaboration, specifically, on equity and learning outcomes in the districts involved in CAP-Ed’s programs.

Research Team

Dr. Christina Murdoch
Executive Director, Center for Applied Policy in Education, and Principal Investigator

Dr. Tom Timar
Professor Emeritus, UC Davis School of Education
Tom’s areas of expertise include education finance, policy, and governance.

Robin Martin
Director of Educational Research and Evaluation, UC Davis School of Education
Robin’s research interests focus on the role of intermediaries in bridging the gap between research, policy, and practice to promote capacity building around evidence-based best practices.

Mariam Sossouaduono
Graduate Student Researcher, third-year student, UC Davis School of Law
CAP-Ed researchers are undertaking a study of the California Principals’ Support Network to document and share learning from the California Principals Support Network. The research project will synthesize the program evaluation reports and analyze interviews and Action Plans. A case study will illustrate the way in which involvement in the program unfolded in a school to shift leadership practice. A manuscript for publication and a conference proposal will disseminate the study’s findings and contribute to the field.

California Principals’ Support Network annual evaluations indicated that the Network shaped principal leadership by helping principals to collectively monitor student achievement through professional learning communities (PLC) with teachers in network schools. The Network was built on the understanding that “The most powerful strategy for improving both teaching and learning is to create the collaborative culture and collective responsibility of a PLC” and that this would more likely to improve instruction than classroom observations.

The CAPS Network enhanced the instructional efficacy and leadership skills of principals to initiate and support professional learning communities, also increasing the pool of effective principals. The program content, focused on high leverage actions that improve teaching and learning, impacted principals’ leadership actions in their school sites and their confidence in key aspects of instructional leadership.

We know that principals are highly satisfied with the program and rated the content presented to them as excellent. We also know that principals report gaining confidence in many critical leadership tasks. Further, principals reported not just planning action related to CAPS content in their school sites, but taking action in a significant number of key areas. Actions planned and taken largely aligned with the content of the sessions, indicating that principals found the content meaningful and, in many cases, were able to implement it immediately.

Both principals and teachers reported observing significantly greater implementation of effective PLCs in their schools at the end of the year than at the beginning, this includes principals in their first year of the CAPS Network program.

“Since our last session, I have been more intentional about asking teachers to provide evidence of student learning in reflecting conversations and mid-year professional growth meetings. In some ways, distance learning is even more conducive to sharing these types of artifacts (e.g., assessment data, digital student assignments, videos students submit for performance based tasks, etc.).”

Network Principal
Leveraging Policy and Research

Strategic Systems Leadership Building Positive District Cultures

The future of CAP-Ed is rich with opportunities for the expansion and growth of our networks and programs across the state. New projects for the upcoming year include a leadership institute, while our two pillars will continue to guide all the work we do.

Pillar 1: School and District Leadership and Development

CAP-Ed builds leadership centered on the district as the unit of change. To do this, CAP-Ed’s programs are relentlessly student centered, placing teaching and learning at the center of the district’s work. We build system-wide coherence and organizational capacity by creating professional and collaborative learning cultures. Our collaborative networks develop authentic, practical improvements for students.

CAP-Ed leads opportunities for educational leaders to develop and advocate for bottom-up policy recommendations that are grounded in real world experiences of school district and school leaders. Our programs create opportunities for district and school leaders to engage with and apply system and instructional data and research to real world educational problems.

Pillar 2: Leveraging Policy and Research

CAP-Ed’s programs provide opportunities for educational leaders to advocate for and develop impactful and relevant policy recommendations that are grounded in the real world experiences district superintendent and school leaders.

CAP-Ed’s programs bring district and school leaders together to engage in deep learning through collaborative explorations of problem-based conversations, applied research and by harnessing the power of collaborative professionalism.

Going through last year with the Network has really helped—helped me to be more proactive rather than being reactive. It created that space where amongst the chaos I was able to think clearly, think forward. I think the Network really helped me seize the reins.”

Network Principal

Upcoming

53 superintendents are enrolled in 3 cohorts for 2022–2023

540,000 TK–12 students in rural, urban, and suburban districts are served by superintendents in these programs

Summer Leadership Institute for Superintendents

One of our initiatives in 2023 is the launch of the Summer Leadership Institute for California Superintendents. This statewide institute will bring together members of the Superintendents’ Executive Leadership Forum and the California Superintendents’ Collaborative Network for a two-day convening in Napa, California. SELF alumni, representing more than 20% of the state’s superintendents, will also be invited.
Investing in the Future of Education

Since 2008, CAP-Ed has received $6 million in university, state, and private foundation funding for support for our programs.

The CAP-Ed team is proud to work alongside all our funding partners who enable us to continue building a connected network of scholars, educators, and policymakers who are dedicated to providing progressive and equitable education solutions for students all across California.

Our partners have included:

Endnotes

8 Fullan, M. (2002). Principals as leaders in a culture of change, educational leadership. michaelfullan.ca/Articles_02/03_02.htm
It is helpful to hear the challenges faced by others and to consider them within one’s own context. It often reminds one that most challenges are not unique but rather they are shared by most, including those leading in entirely different contexts.”

SELF Superintendent
CAP-ED TEAM
Christina E. Murdoch
Executive Director
Amy Liedstrand
Program Coordinator
Parwana Mehr
Undergraduate Student Assistant
Mariam Sossouadouno
Research Assistant

POLICY FELLOWS
Davis Campbell
Senior Policy Fellow
Steven Ladd
Policy Fellow
Thomas Timar
Senior Policy Fellow &
Professor Emeritus

PROGRAM PARTNERS
Alan Daly
Professor UCSD, Education Studies
Janet Chrispeels
Professor Emeritus, UCSD
Jennifer Jeffries
Superintendent Network Facilitator
Melissa Wolf
Program Coordinator

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