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ABSTRACT

This study investigated two different responses to the need to develop effective means to mobilize and improve the delivery of educational resources. The top-down approach is an effort to replace the centralized State department of education with a decentralized network of Regional Centers (RCs). The bottom-up approach is a grass roots movement by some school districts to join in Voluntary Collaboratives (VCs) to share resources and work cooperatively toward common goals. Both approaches have their strengths. A network of RCs would improve interschool communication and disperse educational innovations on regional and Statewide levels and could facilitate distribution of State and federal resources. VCs would facilitate the sharing of change strategies among cooperating districts and would be highly responsive and adaptive to the needs of individual school districts. The study concludes that both approaches are valuable and that Massachusetts should support and attempt to coordinate the concurrent development of both RCs and VCs. (JG).

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**ORGANIZING FOR IMPROVING DELIVERY OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES
IN MASSACHUSETTS**

**VOLUME I: A PROCESS APPROACH TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF
REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL DELIVERY SYSTEMS
IN MASSACHUSETTS.**

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FOREWORD

I have seized with enthusiasm this opportunity to examine collaboration and consolidation in the educational milieu of Massachusetts. The underlying issues strike me as extremely important, involving as they do the balance between state and local support for the many school districts in need of new services. To be able to plunge into the task without an overriding commitment to either one of two interesting approaches has been refreshing. This orientation and the availability of relevant literature, plans and operating experience have all contributed to what will be a very evident appreciation for two very different approaches that seem to promise complementarity while sustaining a flexible balance between state and local participation.

There is one bias that runs through the discussion presented here and, the conclusions as well. This entirely conscious slant reflects convictions that have grown tall in the course of my participation in many educational planning activities in this country and overseas. These convictions have to do with the limitations of us all in visualizing what can, will or should happen as a result of changes we would introduce into the complex system of educational institutions. What has been called "a process approach" to development responds to a growing appreciation of how little we can know before we try, observe and evaluate. A direct consequence of this admitted bias is a strong plea for the vigorous and concurrent development of more than one approach to the problem at hand. With reasonable support and freedom to cope with issues as they arise, I am confident that operators rather than planners will invent the optimal system.

In addition to a sense of the importance of the problem and an admitted bias for learning by doing, I have been supported by considerable factual material and relevant experience. It has been possible to draw on a very extensive review of the literature (Volume II) concerned with the decentralization of educational systems and relate the results to personal experiences with developments in several other states as well as plans for regionalization in Massachusetts.

Familiarity with collaboratives in Massachusetts and elsewhere has been useful -- especially the numerous opportunities to observe the development of the Merrimack Education Center as it has grown during the last six years. But, data and experience are never fully adequate. This treatment of the problem of consolidation and collaboration should be regarded as an individual effort. Hopefully it is one that will lead to action and subsequently to learning that will stimulate more action -- all of which provides more and better resources to enrich the learning environment of the state's youth.

Donald W. Meals

CONCLUSIONS

The Governor's Commission on School District Collaboration and Consolidation should

- Propose and publicly support the *concurrent* development of both SDE Regional Centers and Voluntary Collaboratives as potentially complementary and highly beneficial means of improving the availability of high quality educational services to public schools within the state.
- Establish in association with the *Ad Hoc Center* at the Massachusetts Advisory Council on Education a committee or center to monitor, coordinate and evaluate the further development and integration of SDE Regional Centers and Voluntary Collaboratives.
- Act promptly to ensure the availability of funds needed to facilitate the formation and/or expansion of voluntary collaboratives and provide adequate support for the communication of successful practices, training of staff personnel and studies of factors affecting the successful operation of collaboratives.

A PROCESS APPROACH TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL EDUCATION DELIVERY SYSTEMS IN MASSACHUSETTS

INTRODUCTION

OLD PROBLEM – NEW POSSIBILITIES

Mobilizing, deploying and utilizing an all-too-limited set of resources has always been a major challenge to educational leaders. Today in Massachusetts, however, the challenge is more exciting and laden with opportunities than it has been for many decades. This is so because innovators at state and local levels have provided two promising but seemingly different responses to the need to mobilize and make more effective the delivery of educational resources. One, already being implemented, decentralizes the State Department of Education, bringing resources closer to the user – Regional Centers (RC). The other comes from the grass roots of education and joins independent school districts into a voluntary sharing relationship – the Voluntary Collaborative (VC).

The second, or voluntary approach, is operational and, like the first, can project what has been learned from practical experience to a state-wide system. There are thus two growing systems for meeting a traditional but now more pressing challenge. Are the two approaches competitive or complementary? If they are potentially complementary, how can their concurrent development be guided to maximize the benefits of both? This discussion addresses these and related questions. Its purpose is to assist those wishing to respond to opportunities for improving the effectiveness of education in Massachusetts by suggesting how and why both Regional Centers and Voluntary Collaboratives can be encouraged to evolve together and find their way toward a system that will be stronger than is possible with either one separately. This is intended as a reasoned argument for taking two roads to Rome.

SOLUTION – AN ADAPTIVE PROCESS

The organization of educational institutions in Massachusetts has evolved to its present form as a result of new needs and new perceptions of ways of meeting those needs. In fact, the system, as it presently exists, has been “designed” by the process of accommodating emerging requirements. Like other social systems, new developments or innovations may quicken an essentially adaptive process – hopefully reduce some of the lag between newly emergent needs and effective response. But, failure to recognize that intervention, however well conceived, must inevitably evolve and adapt, can lead to disappointment surprise and, sometimes, to failure. Allowing for a new development to become part of the

adaptive process enables the planner to obtain feedback from the first implementation steps; use that feedback to make adjustments he could not otherwise have anticipated.¹ The impetuous innovator is almost always less effective than the patient planner.

A fundamental premise of the analysis that follows is that the process of adaptation will inevitably and forcefully shape such new delivery systems as are introduced. In keeping with this premise, the role of those who "design" and plan organizational change becomes one of facilitating and guiding the process of change. Thus, we regard the development of a new regional delivery system for education in Massachusetts as involving guidance, coordination, and facilitation for the developmental process that takes place out there in the operating system. Planning and implementing these changes are not activities that can be carried out from beginning to end behind a desk or inside a computer. The adaptive process -- guided, encouraged and facilitated by planners -- is the most reliable inventor of new social systems, including those for the delivery of educational services.

TWO APPROACHES: TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP

Until recently, in Massachusetts, as in most other states, local school systems related directly to a state organization responsible for the governance of public education. In the 1950's, the Federal Government and a number of states intensified their efforts in behalf of education through mandated standards, greater financial support, the active encouragement of innovation and vigorous attempts to overcome inequities in educational opportunities. Despite new energy geared to high purposes, solid evidence of progress was hard to find. The educational apparatus was fragmented and pulled in conflicting directions by a complex power structure.² Concerns about the adequacy of the local-state, or two-level structure surfaced slowly in some places; erupted in others. From the top, State Departments of Education (SDE) eager to serve local institutions sought to be more sensitive to their needs. Concurrently, local school systems pressing for state and federal funds looked upward for a more responsive state organization. There then began in New York, Texas, Pennsylvania, and other states an organizational response to this newly-perceived need. An intermediate, or regional structure was established; there began a top-down articulation of state structures. Meanwhile, independent school districts seeking to respond to escalating standards for specialized services, found budgets growing very rapidly.

In a number of instances the cost crunch of the late 1960's and early 70's forced planners to seek more economical ways of providing new services to meet rising standards for excellence and accountability. Under this pressure, inventive administrators found that resources could be shared among several districts. In several states the shared resources were provided by regional organizations or units of the State Department of Education. In a few instances, schools

voluntarily established collaborative relationships as a mechanism for gaining access to a jointly-owned set of resources. This development appears as a bottom-up movement to make better use of local resources.

There have been two forces pushing toward regionalization in education. The first was an organizational response to the need for a more effective state organization. The second responded to both the need and the opportunity for improved efficiency in the utilization of resources by independent school districts. Both movements seek to overcome the undesirable consequences of fragmentation. They are different, however, in ways that are obvious and perhaps in potentialities that are not yet understood. Planners must understand these forces, for both are part of the adaptive processes at work within the hodgepodge of institutions, power fields and constraints sometimes called the educational "system."

SUMMARY – ENCOURAGE BOTH DEVELOPMENTS

In the following sections, and after a brief characterization of both Regional Centers and Voluntary Collaboratives, we examine the key functional requirements of regional systems and some of the ways they may be met. We then compare and contrast the two mechanisms to reveal how they are different and complementary. Our conclusion that both have a place in the optimal system leads to a discussion of how complementarity can be achieved. Our observations take us back to "process" or adaptive evolution as the basic force in system design. The approach that emerges consequently focuses on those interventions in this process that will facilitate the emergence of an effective balance between governmental and voluntary regional delivery systems. The operator is the designer -- the planner's role is that of maintaining an environment that facilitates the working out of the adaptive process.

BACKGROUND

It will prove helpful to characterize the two principal mechanisms for sharing resources within regions of the state. The regional centers of the Massachusetts Department of Education (RC) and the Voluntary Collaborative (VC) are each described briefly. This serves as a point of departure for more detailed comparisons of the functions each performs, their manner of operations, and limitations. Through a set of contrasts we hope to prepare the way for a better appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of each for improving the effectiveness of the SDE and for sharing resources.

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION/REGIONAL CENTERS

Development of RCs as an elaboration of the SDE began in Massachusetts in 1966. By 1973, six were operational. The commitment of the Massachusetts SDE to regionalization has been demonstrated by added budgetary support in 1974 and the reassignment of central staff to centers. The hope of many that the RCs will be regarded shortly as *the* SDE seems within grasp. Massachusetts was not alone among the states moving toward decentralization. New York State began somewhat earlier to create regional service centers. At about the same time, Texas and Pennsylvania were engaged in major decentralization moves. Several other states made limited attempts at decentralization; today a number of SDEs have, or are considering, decentralization.

What appears to be a trend originally motivated by the desire to make SDEs more responsive to local needs received considerable encouragement from Federal plans for revenue sharing. In a number of states, these plans triggered a search for an organizational framework that would assure a responsive and equitable allocation of new funds to school districts. While regionalization appeared to offer a useful step in this direction, it is too early to determine whether these goals can be reached.

What the RCs in Massachusetts are doing and will do in the future is determined in part by the functions they are charged with performing.* Programs under way and projected in the newer centers include needs assessment, identification of area and state resources, delivery of services, information dissemination, consultation, assistance in effecting change, and the interpretation of statutes and regulations. The RCs are also available to serve as bases for planning and cooperation among LEAs and between them and other public agencies. It is clear that the way these functions will be carried out and their priorities will reflect linkage to

* Later, certain constraints are discussed that may affect what can, in fact, be accomplished.

the SDE. If for no other reason, relationships to LEAs will be shaped by the fact that the SDE has obligations to *all* the citizens of the state. The necessary and continuous process of interpreting standards and regulations will also color relationships between RCs and LEAs. However responsive the regional representatives of the SDE may wish to be, each will be linked through a hierarchy to the state government. The point is not that this is undesirable. Rather, it is that the RCs' identification with the state power structure will enable them to do some things well and others less effectively.

Staff salaries and operational expenses for the six Massachusetts regional centers have been incorporated in the state budget for this year. Following a firm timetable, staff will be transferred from the central office of the SDE to the RCs. A program of training and organizational development has also been scheduled to ensure a smooth reorientation of staff operating styles and central office procedures. It seems reasonable to expect the funds supporting RCs to increase over the years ahead if SDE services become more responsive to local needs as a result of regionalization. Whether this growth will be accompanied by a concomitant decrease in central elements of the SDE is less certain. If a trend in this direction were to be sustained over a period of five years, it would attract national attention as a significant departure from the pattern of the decentralization process elsewhere. Although the possibility exists that regional capabilities will grow as the central staff continues to diminish in size, this seems unlikely in the long run.

VOLUNTARY COLLABORATIVES

In limited form the Voluntary Collaborative (VC) probably predates most SDEs. The mechanism has been operative, in principle, whenever two schools pooled a resource, traded a teacher, or otherwise cooperated on a voluntary basis. The process is that of sharing; it is as simple in principle as borrowing a cup of sugar. Organizations of educators, however, dedicated to sharing resources, blossomed in the late 50's and early 60's with the aid of USOE funds. But most of these centers survived only as long as Federal funds were available. A few remain. Notable among those presently operating in Massachusetts are several in Boston,³ EDCO and the Merrimack Education Center (MEC). The latter, by virtue of its growth and the diversity of its services, serves here as an example of a self-sustaining voluntary collaborative. Through this center 100,000 students and 6,000 professional staff members are served in 20 school districts. A recent case study describes MEC's history and mode of operation in considerable detail.⁴

If regionalization of the SDE is a top-down elaboration of the state's educational apparatus, the Voluntary Collaborative is a bottom-up development. The VC's potential for enhancing local educational resources stems from the fact that whatever it may do or become, it is a mechanism for *sharing on a voluntary*

basis. These two qualities account for the collaborative's mode of operation, they prefigure a contribution to education that seems likely to be both different and complementary to that provided by SDE/RCS.

Sharing within a collaborative is a pooling of resources held in common by the participants.* Whatever is done with these resources the collaborating parties have first claim on the benefits. There is an implied contract that calls for the VC to make services supported by *all* participants available equally to *all* of them. Because participants own the common resources, they do not expect that their allocation will be based on criteria other than their own; values are frankly parochial. For example, it would be unusual for a collaborative to divert a major portion of its resources to a non-member school district because that district could demonstrate a greater need than participants in the collaborative. Compensatory actions of this type would be regarded as the legitimate responsibility of the SDE. In reality, the VC extends the principle of local support and local control beyond the LEAs to a limited range of services. As a consequence it overcomes some deficiencies associated with local autonomy without the necessity of submitting to allocation criteria reflecting state-wide values or priorities.

The voluntary relationship of a LEA to a collaborative profoundly affects how it operates. Support given by a school committee may be withdrawn by that same body. Services that are used more by some participants than by others will be paid for by users in order to ensure an equitable use of the pooled resources. As a consequence, there is an awareness of costs and a freedom to act at the local level on the basis of perceived cost and benefit – and act quickly. A staff member of a collaborative in Boston characterized the benefit of this quality as, "...it keeps you listening to what people want."³ The collaborative places the control of shared resources directly in the hands of those who make their availability possible. The direct and constant accountability of the collaborative to its members appears to encourage sharing that leads to a responsive use of common resources.

The growth of VCs clearly depends on local initiative. Consequently, their essential qualities would be smothered by mandating their development or prescribing their mode of operation. Unlike the SDE with a strong leader at the helm to initiate action and direct implementation, a system of VCs calls for a grass roots response in many places. As an extension upward of local funding and control, collaboration among collaboratives must also evolve from the bottom up. Once established, cooperation among VCs probably will lack strong central

* Collaboration may take a variety of forms depending on the range of services offered and the relationship to clients. Here we assume a deliberate, rather than causal relationship with a set of participants and an active program for the refinement and delivery of services.

direction because responsiveness to local needs will be preminent. Unless encouraged and assisted without the requirement of conformity, collaboratives are likely to grow slowly.

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REGIONALIZATION REQUIREMENTS

The RC and the VC represent two attempts springing from different directions to overcome fragmentation of the educational "system" and to improve the quantity and quality of learning experiences while minimizing the cost of doing so. Before we examine how each of these approaches contributes to this end result, we must set forth the requirements for an effective regionalization to take place; this will provide a standard against which to measure two approaches being examined here. The following is a description of functions judged to contribute to the aims of regionalization. However, until analyses of the existing but highly diverse regionalization structures yield more definitive data,* such lists of functions are merely guides for planners who want to encourage organizational changes.

FACILITATE CHANGE

Critics of public education have agitated for improved utilization of research-based knowledge and resources. Frustrated by resistance to change, educational leaders have looked to regional structures for mechanisms that would speed up the implementation of innovations. Among the many writers who have discussed this problem, Havelock⁵ emphasizes the need for a "Linking Agency" to facilitate change. This agency would serve a number of districts by assisting them in identifying needs, finding resources and improving their "...capacity and level of competency in problem solving, resource retrieval and planning." Similar proposals, but with less explicit prescriptions for linking research-based resources to local needs propose the establishment of regional agencies as vehicles for facilitating change. Both the resistance to change and the promise of linking agencies indicate that a regional organization should facilitate change within the school districts that are in its sphere of influence.

INCREASE RESOURCES

A regional entity that diminishes resistance to change — in the manner proposed by Havelock or otherwise — will increase the demand for resources needed to implement change. If the local budget is close to its limit, change may be temporary and this will, in turn, lead to frustration. The regional agency may find it must create new resources. For instance, in-service training may be needed; specialists in reading, special education or speech may be required for short

* See the second volume of this report for the results of a literature review relevant to this observation.

intervals and an independent district cannot justify full-time employment of a person to meet those needs. The regional organization then should be able to obtain and share these needed resources. In this era when educational requirements almost always exceed available resources, a regional agency should facilitate change *and* help provide the new resources that change may require.

DELIVER RESOURCES

The independent school district having recognized a need for a new resource, will find that the regional agency has acquired it and is prepared to make it available. Whether this resource is used now depends on how it is delivered. Long lead times, red tape, or elaborate approval systems can render the desired resources unobtainable. It is clear that a regional support system should be responsive, low cost, reliable and rapid. What is required to realize this is less clear. Is it enough, for example, to move representatives of the supplier closer to the client or must the regional agency adopt some of the marketing-like methods of the commercial suppliers of educational materials? The means for meeting the requirement for a regional delivery system is not clear although the need is evident.

OVERCOME INEQUITIES

In Massachusetts as in most other states, educational authorities have adopted policies that commit them to the equalization of educational resources. State policy guidelines are frustrated by the fact that most of the financial resources for education come *from* local communities and therefore depend on commitments *by* local communities. To cope with this barrier to the equalization of opportunity the SDE has and, we believe should, provided incentives for poorer communities to seek proportionately more aid. Progress has been slow and unsatisfying. At the same time, the principle of resource equalization has become more widely accepted. This had led to greater pressure on the SDE to devise better ways of allocating equalization aid. Regional agencies, especially those that are part of the SDE, will certainly be called on to help close the gap between policy and practice. Accordingly, the ability to make positive contributions to the equalization commitment of the state is a crucial requirement of regional activities in Massachusetts.

INCREASE COMMUNICATION

The fragmented nature of the public educational establishment in Massachusetts has imposed almost impossible burdens on the SDE. In part, the bold actions now under way to decentralize reflect an awareness of the fact that communication has not been entirely satisfactory in the past. Regional agencies will attempt to assume some of the communication responsibilities of the SDE

and improve their effectiveness. In particular, it will entail the interpretation of statutes and regulations; criteria for grants and other forms of aid must also be provided to local school districts in a timely and effective manner. Equally important is communication in the opposite direction. Independent school districts must be able to provide the SDE with input on policy issues, needs and community level views. For the SDE to be both sensitive and responsive to the 351 cities and towns in the state, this upward flow of information must operate with efficiency and clarity.

Regional agencies will find it necessary to facilitate a two-way flow of information. Failure to do so would obviously limit both the effectiveness of the SDE and the regional agency. Moreover, lack of improvement in communication between local and state educational authorities would prevent the growth of trust needed to facilitate linking, equalization actions and other functional requirements of decentralization.

SATISFYING REQUIREMENTS – COMPARISON OF SDE/RC AND VC

IMPLICATIONS OF CONJECTURING

Before examining how the RC and the VC compare in their potential for satisfying the key requirements of a regional agency it is first desirable to recognize that such comparisons are largely conjectural. As the second volume of this report indicates, there is no body of data that answers questions about which approach is better and under what circumstances. We are forced to rely on experience elsewhere and to some extent the planning that has preceded the current decentralization developments in Massachusetts for conjectures concerning the RCs. MEC and the Havelock case study of its operations provide important input, but much less than we would need to form definitive conclusions. As a consequence, the best that can be offered is a set of judgments based on available plans and operating experience. Others examining these issues will probably suggest different requirements and/or estimate different relative capabilities for satisfying those described in the previous section.

Does the fact that it is necessary to rely on conjecture rather than on hard data in planning for regionalization mean that there are no guidelines? Clearly, this is not the case. The fact that we lack definitive data tells us that systematic observation and formative evaluation are needed -- a requirement that is dominant. But, the lack of hard data on which to base a plan for regionalization points to a related consideration of equal importance. Should both approaches promise benefits and if (even on a conjectural basis) these benefits are complementary, *both* should be encouraged. Doing so will provide needed opportunities for each approach to strive to reach its potential and at the same time produce the operational data for evaluative comparisons. With this aim in mind, we turn here to a frankly judgmental comparison of how the RC and the VC are likely to satisfy our set of requirements for regional agencies. The key question is: are the two approaches likely to be complementary?

REGIONAL CENTERS

As summarized in Table 1 the RC seems likely to be superior to the VC in its potential for improving communication and in overcoming inequities. Although the RC superiority in communication potential is reasonably obvious, this superiority is important because it calls attention to the role of the RC in relating school districts to the state administrative structure. It not only will accomplish this end more effectively than a central SDE, it does a better job than the VC is likely to do. The VC, by virtue of its voluntary character and grass roots support lies outside the bureaucratic structure and consequently would serve less well as a link in the communication process within this structure. The VC can, however, facilitate communication and the exchange of successful support practices between districts and among collaboratives. Such communication will result in a dissemination network that is separate and supplementary to that of the SDE.

TABLE 1

**COMPARISON OF POTENTIAL CAPABILITY OF SDE/RC AND VC
FOR MEETING KEY REGIONALIZATION REQUIREMENTS**

<u>Requirement</u>	<u>Regional Agency</u>	
	<u>RC</u>	<u>VC</u>
Facilitate Change	High potential – planned function of RCs.	High potential – linking operational at MEC.
Increase Resources	Limited – improved distribution and allocation	* High potential – local contributions add resources that are shared.
Deliver Resources	High potential for state and federal resources – adaptation slow.	* Highly responsive, encourages rapid adaptation to perceive cost/benefit.
Overcome Inequities	* Improvement over central control.	Limited to sharing of resources among collaborating districts.
Increase Communication	* High potential.	Limited potential unless special network is created.

Structural connections to the state organization seem likely to limit the ability of RCs to create and deliver *new* resources. This simply reflects the fact that the RCs can provide only what they are given by Federal and State governments. Acting within a region the RC can improve the allocation and distribution of these resources -- a non-trivial benefit. An important limitation is its speed of response or delivery. The rate at which resources become available is undeniably slow and still slower in changing to meet new needs that arise. This will surely limit the ability of the RC to meet these requirements.

Perhaps the most severe limitation is the delivery capability -- where the RC will take the role of a dispenser of grants. Funds for innovative projects and supportive services will be received as grants rather than bought by the districts being served. Requests for grants are unlikely to be withdrawn as needs change. As a consequence, the RC will find it necessary to expend much energy in determining needs and evaluating results. In contrast, a VC that charges part of the cost for some of its services operates on an exchange economy, where the user has the obligation as well as the motivation for continuously assessing the worth of what he receives. Continuous evaluation forces the VC to withdraw or modify services and to develop others responding to new needs. The VC must be entrepreneurial in its creation and delivery of products. The difference in the type of funds employed by the RC and VC results in contrasting styles of operation and products. Both appear to have a place in the regional response to local needs: their output will probably be complementary.

As a linking agency serving to facilitate change, the RC seems to have considerable potential. We see in the plans for these centers ample provision for the development of this capability. How rapidly the RCs will move to become fully effective in this regard will depend upon many considerations. Not the least of these is the degree to which their energies will be diverted to other functions such as overcoming inequities and communication problems. Only operational experience revealing the adaptive process will make clear whether facilitating change is best accomplished by the RC or the VC. For the present, however, it seems highly probable that the RC can perform this function and do it reasonably well.

VOLUNTARY COLLABORATIVES

The VC is clearly capable of creating and sustaining mechanisms that link schools and facilitate change. The record of MEC serves as an example. It may be that the voluntary association provides a better psychological environment for this linking operation. We have no data, however, to support this position and must therefore view both the RC and the VC as having the potential for meeting this important requirement for regional agencies. The possibility that the different styles of operation of the RC and the VC will influence how this function is performed suggests that both approaches to this function should be developed.

It is evident, as Table 1 shows, that the VC provides access to a limited communication network in comparison with that of the RC. Even if each VC should be tied into a communication system involving other VCs, the requirement for two-way communication on some matters with state-wide school governance would not be met as well as by a set of RCs. Obviously a linkage between VCs and the SDE directly or through coexisting RCs would compensate for this limitation. At the same time, a VC network may provide limited but very useful data to the SDE on local needs and sharing practices. Thus, interconnected RC and VC communication networks would probably be superior to the communication capability of a system of RCs only.

In creating and delivering *new* resources, the VC seems likely to be superior to the RC. Its ability to operate on an exchange economy, freedom from bureaucratic constraints and use of resources offered by collaborating schools provide some of the basis for this high potential. What seems more important, however, is the possibility that a number of VCs could provide a portion of the state's schools with better services. Then, as the RCs are called upon to support districts not within a collaborative, they would be able to concentrate their capabilities on these districts. Again we see a potential symbiosis between RCs and VCs in a mixed system of regional agencies.

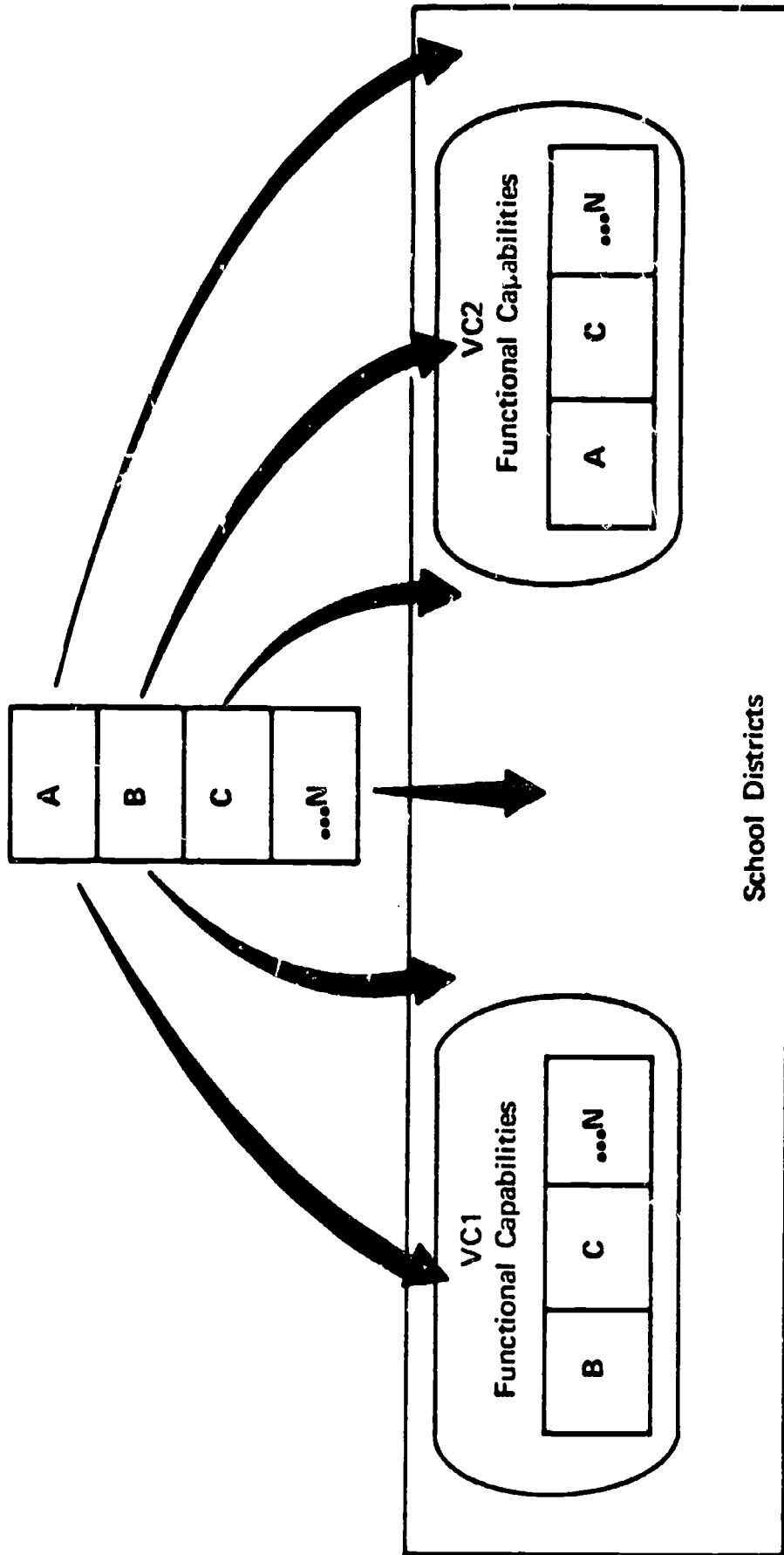
FUNCTIONAL COMPLEMENTARITY

Even without hard data, plans for RCs and the experience of MEC as an example of a VC suggest that both approaches can meet some of the requirements of regionalization. As Table 1 summarizes, RCs have a higher potential for performing certain functions and VCs seem more promising as a means of providing others. Our conjectures do *not* yield a basis for accepting one and rejecting the other. In fact, the best evidence available indicates that both may have a place in a system of regionalization. The tentative conclusion leads us to speculate on how these approaches might complement one another.

In Figure 1, the functional capabilities of a single RC (SDE/RCI) are represented symbolically as "A," "B," "C" and "N" along with those of two VCs within the territory of the RC. We have assumed for the purpose of examining VC-RC relationships that not all districts are associated with one or the other collaborative. Moreover, the VCs are represented as having different and limited capabilities – a not unlikely circumstance. The implications of this model situation are of interest. The RC provides its full range of services to those schools outside the collaboratives. In addition, the RC provides such services to the schools within a collaborative as are not provided by the collaborative: Service "A" to VC1 and Service "B" to VC2. The now-evident benefit of a two-fold approach to regionalization stems from the fact that the RC can concentrate Federal and State resources by allocating the necessarily limited amounts to locations where the need is greatest. The VCs have thus relieved the RC of some, but not all, of the demand. Indirectly this permits the RCs to take more actions to equalize educational opportunity. If this potential for functional complementarity could be coordinated among VCs and between VCs and the RC, even greater benefits might be obtained. VC1 might assist VC2 in developing functional capability "B" while reciprocally VC2 aids VC1 in developing functional capability "A." The result of a successful exchange of this sort would be a lessening of the demand on the RC for "A" and "B" by VC1 and VC2. The benefit is obvious. The RC can now transfer resources, concentrate on what it has found it can do best and make better use of resources allocated for purposes of equalization. Meanwhile what is the advantage that accrues to the school districts participating in the collaboration? Have they merely relieved the state of some of its burden? Certainly not. Each district obtains services it helps select and at a lower cost than if they were forced to act independently. State assistance, if justified, might still be obtained from the RC for specific equalization problems.

Judgmental though it is, the conclusion seems clear. Both RCs and VCs can make meaningful and, in some instances, complementary contributions to the requirements that motivate regionalization. By developing and coordinating RCs and VCs benefits to school districts and to students are likely to be greater than would be the case of selecting one and rejecting the other. Massachusetts faces an opportunity to add two and two to produce a sum of five or better. The remaining question is: How can a mixed approach to regionalization be carried out to ensure the realization of the potential benefits?

SDE/RCI FUNCTIONAL CAPABILITIES



FUNCTIONAL COMPLEMENTARITY - SDE/RC AND VCS

FIGURE 1

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GETTING THERE FROM HERE

To take the two paths we have just examined, to approach regionalization via simultaneous top-down and bottom-up developments, and to have the approaches support one another may seem to be an enormously complex task. Indeed, it could be. If enough were known about each approach -- how best to implement each and the response of SDE staff personnel, school administrators or community leaders -- and we could identify clearly optimal tactics, the detailed plans would fill volumes. The fact is, we do not know the best way to make an RC responsive to local needs nor do we know the full potential of MEC or have a prescription for achieving it if we did. The optimal form of the RC and VC approach to regionalization will emerge slowly, and then only if imaginative and well supported leaders are working toward a set of appropriate objectives. As the RCs and VCs cope with issues, learn and adapt, we shall see how much each can contribute to effective regionalization. The process of becoming will reveal what can be.

The uncertainties surrounding any approach to regionalization force us to reject detailed plans. They allow -- even invite -- a strategy. In this instance the strategy calls for encouraging, guiding and learning from two concurrent developments of regional capabilities. The adaptive process becomes one of the architects -- perhaps the chief designer. But, this does not mean that planners let nature take its course and do nothing but observe the results. The developmental process will yield insights and operational capabilities only if the approaches are well supported. Moreover, few lessons will be learned if there is no plan to record the antecedents of both success and failure. Finally, certain issues such as how RCs and VCs interact may be too important to allow to occur in the indefinite future. Some guidance for the developmental phase will be necessary to assure the exposure of this and other key issues. What is needed, then, is a visualization of what may be possible and desirable. With this in mind along with an appreciation for our dependence on the developmental process for insight, we need only a plan for supporting, guiding and evaluating the adaptive process. The beginning of a visualization of two parallel approaches to regionalization is presented below along with an outline of the steps to be taken during the first two years of the development-learning process.

THE VISUALIZATION

A concept for regionalization built on the productive coexistence of SDE/RCs and VCs is shown in Figure 2. Here the RCs have geographic responsibility for performing those regionalization functions they prove capable of performing. At the same time groups of schools within the region of each RC are working collaboratively. The VCs accomplish as many of the functions identified earlier as they are able to perform. As VCs succeed, the RCs adjust their delivery capability

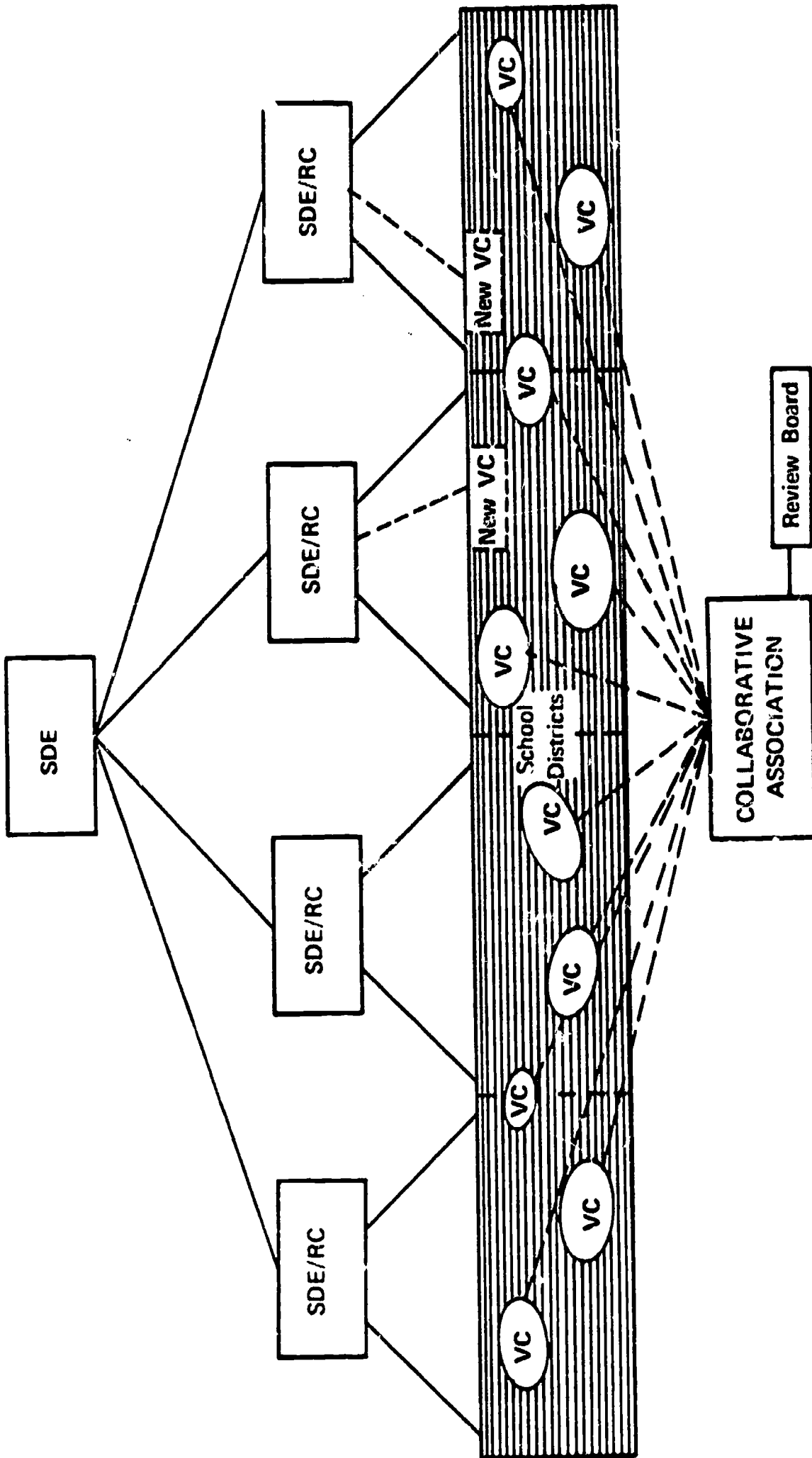


FIGURE 2

PRODUCTIVE CO-EXISTENCE – SDE REGIONAL CENTERS AND VOLUNTARY COLLABORATIVES

to concentrate on giving more support to districts outside VCs and to performing functions for all districts (including those in VCs) that are not being accomplished by the VCs. The SDE has established a network that brings it in closer touch with the fragmented system. It does not, however, attempt to satisfy all needs or organize all sharing enterprises. The balance between RC and VC is a dynamic one changing within a district and different from RC to RC.

The model shown in Figure 2 suggests several developmental possibilities that deserve consideration. First, it will be desirable for the RC to encourage the creation of VCs. Success in doing so would permit the RC to concentrate its effort on other matters such as equalization or grant approval. We show therefore two RCs as involved in the creation of new VCs.* We might just as well have shown a new VC being brought into being by an older VC. In either case there is, and should be, help and encouragement for the formation of VCs. Our model also shows a communication network for VCs, a Collaborative Association and Review Board. Not shown, but important, is a means of coordinating VCs and RCs. It is clear that a mechanism must be evolved to do so. Since it will not be clear at first what VCs and RCs do best and how they can and should relate, coordination cannot be prescribed at this time. The problem is typical of a number that will emerge during the developmental phase of a regionalization program. Consequently we foresee the need for a steering committee or Ad Hoc Agency to follow, guide and evaluate the related developments. Obviously, this committee will accumulate data now lacking and be able eventually to provide input to policy decisions concerning regionalization.

A DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAM

Only the principal elements of a two-year developmental program are listed here. All evaluations serve the purpose of revealing how best to develop capabilities for meeting regionalization requirements and are therefore formative rather than summative. No attempt has been made to devise a schedule other than to place events within each major category in an approximate sequence.

Regional Centers

1. **Formation:** The SDE timetable for RCs is well developed and should set the pace for the concurrent development of VCs and the evaluation process.

*This help must be conditional on firm plans for the new VC to stand alone. An RC might find it makes effective use of resources by funding an older collaborative's guidance to a new one.

2. Evaluation.
3. Comparison of output with that of VCs.
4. Redirection and realignment of priorities and programs.

Voluntary Collaboratives

1. Formation: Active encouragement including modest financial support for startup will be needed. Assistance from both MEC and a RC should be encouraged to gain insights into the best approach to the formation of new collaboratives.
2. Formation of a Collaborative Association and Review Board.
3. Evaluation.
4. Comparison of output with that of RCs.
5. Redirection and realignment of priorities and programs.

Coordinating Committee or Ad Hoc Agency

1. Formation.
2. Identification of key issues.
3. Establishment of evaluation, study and monitoring plan.
4. Evaluation.
5. Presentation of recommendations for establishing coordination between RCs and VCs.
6. Re-evaluation and policy recommendations.

SUPPORTING ACTIVITIES

We can anticipate at least one important barrier to the concurrent growth, adaptation and interaction of the two approaches to regionalization that appear to be potentially beneficial in Massachusetts. Because the developmental program outlined above depends upon the process of adaptation to produce experience and data, the two approaches must be pursued with approximately equal vigor and competence. In view of the fact that the SDE is now implementing carefully

devised plans for strengthening the Regional Centers, the pace of collaborative development may lag behind that of the Regional Centers. Failure to stimulate a level of collaboration across the state that is comparable to that of the RCs would mean the loss of needed experience and data. Questions concerning anticipated complementarity, needs for coordination and comparative benefits of the two approaches would be difficult to answer except in a very speculative way. To assure ample interaction between RCs and VCs and expose both modes of development to opportunities to participate fully in the adaptive process will require support for VC development. We list below some of the activities that will help sustain an appropriate level of collaborative development during the next two years.

1. *Seed Money:* Communities considering the formation of a collaborative will need funds to explore interests, plan and cover start-up costs. As discussed earlier, continuation of funding beyond a reasonable start-up period would not be consistent with the collaborative approach.
2. *Case Studies:* One of the best ways to capture and make available the experiences growing out of the formative phase of new developments is the case study. Before a new collaborative has reached the first plateau of its learning curve when formal evaluation is justified it will have encountered and solved a number of practical problems. The descriptive style of the case study serves well the aim of making such experiences available to others. An example is the recently completed case study of MEC identified in the references accompanying this report.
3. *Communication of Successful Collaborative Practices:* It will be helpful to new and expanding collaboratives to have easy access to examples of how specific services have been developed and delivered successfully to participants. A newsletter that presents examples of effective collaboration drawn from Massachusetts and the nation as a whole is indicated. Also helpful, in this regard, would be briefings and workshops conducted by representatives of successful collaboratives. As the tempo of collaboration quickens in the state it might be appropriate for the SDE and/or an association of collaboratives to seek Federal funding for the development of a handbook on organization and operations that would make the growing experience with collaboration available to school districts in the State and throughout the country.

4. *Analysis of Issues:* Some of the issues that will be faced as collaboratives grow and shape their relationships to RCs and other VCs can now be identified. Support to those working in and with collaboratives would, we believe, be enhanced by studies that explore key issues and provide guidance that combines relevant experience with an appreciation for the total regionalization process. Examples are:
 - a. Methods for ensuring effective cooperation and mutual support between VCs and RCs.
 - b. Opportunities and risks associated with community and education-oriented collaboratives.
 - c. Factors affecting the pricing of services delivered by collaboratives.
 - d. Cost/Benefit of alternative approaches to the development of services offered by collaboratives.
 - e. Advantages and disadvantages of limiting the delivery of services to participating school districts.
 - f. Techniques for collaboration among collaboratives.
 - g. Potential impact of the volunteer collaborative on the cost of selected services to an independent school district.

5. *Coordination of Development with SDE:* As the SDE continues to implement its plans for decentralization and strengthens the RCs, detailed planning should take into account anticipated collaborative developments. The Coordinating Committee mentioned in the previous section will need to take the initiative in providing the SDE with this information and actively propose ways to increase the coordination of RCs and VCs.

CONCLUSIONS

The Governor's Commission on School District Collaboration and Consolidation should

- Propose and publicly support the *concurrent* development of both SDE Regional Centers and Voluntary Collaboratives as potentially complementary and highly beneficial means of improving the availability of high quality educational services to public schools within the state.
- Establish in association with the *Ad Hoc Center* at the Massachusetts Advisory Council on Education a committee or center to monitor, coordinate and evaluate the further development and integration of SDE Regional Centers and Voluntary Collaboratives.
- Act promptly to ensure the availability of funds needed to facilitate the formation and/or expansion of voluntary collaboratives and provide adequate support for the communication of successful practices, training of staff personnel and studies of factors affecting the successful operation of collaboratives.

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