

# DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 368

EC 202 537

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**TITLE** The Least Restrictive Environment: Knowing One When You See It. News Digest #5.  
**INSTITUTION** Interstate Research Associates, Inc., Washington, D.C.; National Information Center for Handicapped Children and Youth, Washington, DC.  
**SPONS AGENCY** Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.  
**PUB DATE** [86]  
**GRANT** G0084C3500  
**NOTE** 9p.; For related information see EC 202 536-540.  
**AVAILABLE FROM** National Information Center for Handicapped Children and Youth, Box 1492, Washington, DC 20013 (free).  
**PUB TYPE** Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)  
**JOURNAL CIT** News Digest; n5 1986  
**EDRS PRICE** MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
**DESCRIPTORS** \*Disabilities; Education Work Relationship; Elementary Secondary Education; \*Mainstreaming; \*Normalization (Handicapped); Personal Autonomy; Postsecondary Education

## ABSTRACT

This edition of the newsletter of the National Information Center for Handicapped Children and Youth explains the meaning of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and shows how it can be put into operation not only in school but throughout the life of a disabled person. Brief articles have the following titles: "The Least Restrictive Environment: Knowing One When You See It"; "Education" (guidelines for evaluating good LRE programs and suggestions for parents); and "LRE and the Lives of Adults with Disabilities" (helpful organizations, social dimensions of independence, the work world, postsecondary education, and self advocacy). (DB)

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## The Least Restrictive Environment: Knowing One When You See It

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is a term that was first used in court decisions and legislation which came about as part of a national movement to include handicapped persons in the mainstream of community life. Action was needed to remedy a widespread practice of exclusion which existed prior to the 1970's. At that time, many handicapped persons were confined in large institutions where they received minimal services. Others remained at home with their families, but were excluded from the public education system as children and were denied meaningful employment as adults. Even those mildly handicapped persons who received a public education often were placed in environments segregated from their peers.

Such exclusion is now disappearing; attitudes are changing; and excellent integrated programs have been developed and implemented in communities across the nation. However, many parents of handicapped children are still faced with the need to advocate for their child's right to be included "to the maximum extent appropriate" in everyday life. The National Information Center for Handicapped Children and Youth (NICHY) receives many letters from parents concerned about the appropriateness of their child's educational placement and the implications of such placement for the child's future.

The purpose of this issue of *News Digest* is to clarify the meaning of LRE and show how it can be put into operation not only in school but throughout the life of a person with a disability.

### Education

The kind of environment in which children grow up has a powerful impact upon their development. This is true not only of the home environment, but also the school and other environments in which children function. An integrated environment is, by its nature, better able to prepare

children with disabilities for life in the real world. As Bliton and Schroeder (1986) state "If we want students to live in a heterogeneous society, we must prepare them by first integrating them into schools. In this sense, each school becomes a microcosm of the community and society where students can live and work as they grow older." Historically, the concept of Least Restrictive Environment meant that when a government intervenes in a person's life it must do so in a way that least intrudes upon individual rights. The concept was first applied in cases relating to the civil rights of mentally handicapped persons. Public Law 94-142 requires that in order to qualify for Federal assistance under the Act, a state must establish (among other requirements): *Procedures to assure that, to the maximum extent appropriate, handicapped children, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not handicapped, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of handicapped children from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily . . . U.S.C. S 1412 (5) (B).*

■ In special education, the idea of

# News Digest

Information from the  
National Information Center for  
Handicapped Children and Youth

NUMBER 5

LRE was first put into practice by providing a continuum of placements for children with disabilities. Bliton and Schroeder (1986) discuss an article by Deno (1970) which describes a series of placements that ranged from the least restrictive to the most restrictive. Taylor, Biklen, and Searl (1986) discuss the shortcomings of this approach which include:

1. The danger that LRE will be defined in terms of the placements that are available rather than the needs of a particular child.
2. Least restrictive may be interpreted to mean that some sort of restriction is necessary. Decisions about placement should begin with a presumption in favor of integration.
3. There may be a tendency for students to be placed in settings at the most restrictive end of the continuum. Many students with mild disabilities are segregated as well as those with severe and multiple disabilities.
4. Students are likely to remain in more restrictive placements rather than progress to less restrictive settings.
5. The more restrictive settings do not prepare students for the less restrictive settings. Segregated settings do not prepare young people to function in integrated environments.
6. The continuum concept is based on the assumption that some students

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"A child is not just placed in the regular environment and forgotten; rather, the child and the classroom teacher are provided the supports needed to make the placement successful."

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are too handicapped to live and work in society. It was developed at a time when many people with mental retardation lived in institutions and school districts regularly excluded children who were moderately and severely handicapped.

Integration can begin in preschool programs. Winton, Turnbull, and Blacher (1984) review the application of the concept of the Least Restrictive Environment to preschool programs. They point out that publicly supported mainstreamed preschools, with the exception of Head Start, are rare. Even in those states where preschool services are guaranteed to children with handicaps, parents may not be able to find an integrated, publicly supported preschool. The authors review parents' views on the advantages and disadvantages of mainstreamed preschool programs and suggest that parents consider carefully what goes on in a program and how it relates to the needs of the child and the family.

■ As in anything else, there are good integrated programs and there are poor integrated programs. Taylor, Biklen, and Searl (1986) have highlighted some of the components of good programs. This section relies heavily on their paper's key ideas. Readers are urged to obtain a copy of the full text by writing the address listed in the bibliography. A Least Restrictive Environment is characterized by the following elements:

1. Children with disabilities are taught in the same school they would attend if they were not disabled.

2. Decisions concerning a child's educational program are based on that particular child's needs; that is, not all children with the same disability are placed in the same program. Each child is educated in the LRE appropriate to that child.

3. The placement decision is made following the drawing up of an individualized education program (IEP). Based on the educational and related services a child needs, a decision is made jointly by parents and school officials on where the child is placed. School systems must have written placement procedures in place to meet the LRE requirements. Placement decisions are reviewed at least once a year to ensure that the program is meeting the child's needs. Adjustments may be made more often than annually if they are needed.

4. Whenever possible, children with disabilities are taught in regular classes with their nondisabled peers. A child is not just placed in the regular environment and forgotten; rather, the child and the classroom teacher are provided the supports needed to make the placement successful. For the child these supports might include tutoring, assistive devices (such as typewriters, recorders, computers, etc.), texts in large print, or a sign-language interpreter. For the teacher they might include inservice training, a classroom aide, a consultant

teacher, and access to modified curricula or other materials that have been developed to facilitate integration.

5. Special services are provided at regular schools. Physical and occupational therapies, speech and language training, training in sign language or braille, and other services are provided to students based on their needs. If only a few students in the school need such services, the school may share special personnel with one or two other schools or may hire consultants to train and work with the regular teacher. Lack of specialized services cannot be used as a basis for denying placement in integrated settings.

6. Children who cannot be fully integrated into regular classes are integrated to the greatest extent possible. Separate classes are located near regular classes, not in a separate area of the school, and are not given special labels. For example, Room 103 is preferable to the MR class. Students in special classes use the same facilities as other students at the same time. They attend regular classes such as art, music, and physical education and participate in the school's social events, field trips, after school clubs, assemblies, and graduation exercises.

7. Positive attitudes and social integration are actively promoted. Research suggests that social integration is unlikely to occur unless situations are structured to encourage integration (Burstein, 1986). Teachers and staff are provided in-service training on attitude change and are made aware of the many attitude change curricula that are available (Cohen, 1983; Kilburn, 1984). Teachers model appropriate behavior and encourage social interaction between handicapped and nonhandicapped peers. They structure directed play and cooperative learning sessions to increase positive interactions. They may also teach special lessons on disabilities, conduct group exercises or sensitization sessions, and invite handicapped adults to speak to their classes. Handicapped students may be taught specific social skills to increase their positive interactions with peers (Peck and Semmel, 1982).





8. Junior High students are provided career planning and counseling services and prevocational skill training. Prevocational skills include appropriate work-related behaviors and independent functioning skills that will enhance the student's opportunities for a productive adult life. For more information about prevocational skills curricula see Brolin and Brolin (1982).

9. Secondary students are provided opportunities to learn practical vocational and community living skills at normal community training sites. For more information about this kind of programming consult Bellamy (1985) and Wilcox and Bellamy (1982).

■ Parents who are not satisfied that their child is integrated to the maximum extent appropriate can be instrumental in bringing about change. Some approaches that have worked are as follows:

1. *Know the law.* Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, requires schools to educate handicapped children in the Least Restrictive Environment. Most school officials know something about Public Law 94-142 but they may not have actually read the law or its implementing regulations. Parents may benefit from having the exact wording of the law and regulations. In addition to knowing the Federal law, parents should know what their state law says about integration. This information can be obtained by writing to their State Department of Education. Public Law 94-142 contains due process procedures that guarantee that the student's parent or guardian has the right to an impartial hearing and the ability to appeal to the state education agency if they disagree with a school's placement decision. In addition, under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, educational decisions can be appealed to the Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education.

There is also a network of parent coalitions throughout the country which have received funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), to provide training to parents on their children's rights under Public Law

94-142. These coalitions can help parents work for their child's placement in the Least Restrictive Environment. For the address of your State Department of Education, copies of Public Law 94-142 and the implementing regulations, and a list of Federally funded parent coalitions write: NICHCY, P.O. Box 1492, Washington, DC 20013.

2. *Know about successful programs.* Knowing that successful programs exist in all areas of the country can be encouraging to parents as they work for such programs in their own community. In addition, parents and school officials can learn from the experiences of others. Some school districts that have closed segregated schools for students with severe and profound handicaps are found in Madison, Wisconsin; Tacoma, Washington; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Birmingham, Alabama. Three schools that teach trainable mentally retarded students and autistic students in regular or joint classes are McCollum Elementary School in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Ed Smith School in Syracuse, New York; and the Brown School in Louisville, Kentucky. Descriptions of these and other model programs can be found in Ford, Foster, Searl, and Taylor, (1984).

3. *Find others willing to work for integration.* Successful programs take commitment and planning. One approach is to create a task force of professionals and parents who will study model programs; examine present service patterns, resources and needs; write position statements on integration and develop community support for those statements; and finally, produce a plan for achieving integration. Another approach, which was used successfully by parents in Louisville, Kentucky, is to find a principal and several teachers who are willing to commit themselves to making integration work (Taylor, 1982). Their experiences can be used as a model for implementing further programs.

Parents of children with mild disabilities who are concerned about unnecessary segregation of their children may wish to become familiar with Adaptive Learning Environments Model (ALEM). This system of

instruction, which was developed at the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center, is currently being implemented by 150 school districts across 28 states. ALEM concentrates on systematic integration of a range of practices which have been proven to be effective in teaching children with a variety of needs. ALEM is concerned with the use of time by both teachers and students, teachers' feedback and reinforcement of students, quality and pattern of teacher/student interactions, the relationship between the students' needs and the intervention used, and the flexibility of classroom instruction. Studies suggest that ALEM may allow children with mild disabilities to be fully mainstreamed without reliance on resource room or other "pull out" programs. (Wang and Birch, 1984).

■ Parents who are working to ensure that their child is educated in the Least Restrictive Environment should be aware that achieving that goal for all children with disabilities will require changes throughout the educational system. Bliton and Schroeder (1986) state that there are six propositions that must be acted upon:

1. Special education administrators will play a vital role in initiating changes in the education of students with moderate and severe disabilities.

2. Multiple options for placements of students with substantial disabilities which include regular school settings will be made available.

3. Curriculums for students with substantial disabilities will be modified and will include community living, working, and social skill development.

4. Teacher training (pre-service and in-service) will emphasize teaching and managing functional skill development.

5. Agencies providing services to young people with disabilities and their families will develop systems for providing coordinated services in community settings.

6. Public schools will be held accountable for providing a functional education for students with substantial disabilities.

"While the LRE during the school years revolves around issues of placement and opportunities to interact with children who do not have disabilities, for adults and adolescents the critical factors also include independence and freedom of choice."

## LRE and the Lives of Adults with Disabilities

Applying the concept of the Least Restrictive Environment to the lives of adults with disabilities requires a shift in thinking. While the LRE during the school years revolves around issues of placement and opportunities to interact with children who do not have disabilities, for adults and adolescents the critical factors also include independence and freedom of choice. Turnbull and Turnbull (1985) call attention to the close connection between independence and freedom of choice and the concept of the Least Restrictive Environment. They contrast two views of independence. The traditional view of special educators emphasizes the ability to perform certain self-care skills and the ability to make an appropriate psychological separation from parents, professionals, and other care givers. On the other hand, advocates of independent living have suggested that independence ultimately rests on the capacity for self-direction.

In the past, achieving independence has been difficult for persons with disabilities. In addition to the lack of appropriate housing, transportation and employment, adults with disabilities sometimes have been hindered by overprotectiveness of parents (Moise, 1986), or by a service system that fosters inappropriate dependence. For adults with disabilities, the Least Restrictive Environment eliminates obstacles to normal living caused by the attitudes of others and provides the help individuals need to overcome the limitations imposed by their disability.

### Training for Independence

One of the things that can be done

to help adults with disabilities to achieve the Least Restrictive Environment is to teach them the skills they need to live as independently as possible in the community. Probably the most important skills are the ability to make decisions, to express choice, and to be actively engaged in the environment. Various curricula have been developed to help persons with disabilities to develop the decision making skills they need in order to live independently. Close, Sowers, Halpern, and Bourbeau (1985) describe an approach to teaching daily living skills to mildly retarded persons that not only teaches skills but also encourages decision making and self-control. Walker (1984) has put together a workbook on decision making skills for young people with disabilities who are undergoing the transition to independent living. A number of curricula have also been developed to train people with disabilities in daily living skills. *Discover the World of Independent Living* by Leavitt and Terrell (1984) is an example of a curriculum designed for students in transition. It includes units on social skills, health, home management, clothing care, cooking, travel, money management, leisure time activities, and career development. Readers who wish to identify additional examples of curricula on daily living skills should consult Ash (1985). The curricula listed were identified through a national survey of professionals involved in special education.

### Organizations that Can Assist in Achieving Independence

Even with the best of training, persons with disabilities will frequently need continuing support in one form or another to make the most of their opportunities for inde-

pendence. This help can be provided through several different kinds of organizations.

One source of this assistance is the 120 Independent Living Centers located in communities throughout the United States. These centers are described by Jones and Ulicny (1985). The individual needs of consumers determine the services provided by the centers. People with disabilities not only are in charge of the type of services they receive but also are involved in decisions concerning the center's management, organization, and policies. Most of the board members, service providers, and managers of the centers are persons with disabilities.

■ Because of the Independent Living Centers' responsiveness to particular community needs, activities vary widely from center to center but may include the following:

1. Training consumers in the management skills needed to recruit, train, supervise, and pay persons to provide them with needed services. An example of this type of assistance is a personal care attendant to assist a person with a severe disability such as a spinal cord injury with eating, dressing, toileting, and other daily needs.

2. Providing peer counseling from persons who have come to terms with their own disabilities and are able to lend support and serve as role models for others seeking to function independently.

3. Helping consumers locate appropriate housing, which may include providing information about how to apply for subsidized housing, arranging loans for home adaptations, and helping to plan and implement accessibility modifications.

4. Providing special needs transportation and working with the community transportation system to adapt existing services to meet the needs of disabled persons.

5. Making persons aware of their rights and helping them obtain available benefits.

6. Increasing the awareness and changing the attitudes of the nondisabled community.

7. Assisting persons with disabilities in becoming effective indi-

vidual and group advocates. This may include helping a person resolve an unjust personal situation or advocating for needed changes in the community.

For a list of Independent Living Centers in your state write: NICHCY, P.O. Box 1492, Washington, DC 20013.

Some individuals with a disability need more intensive help than can be provided through Independent Living Centers. One alternative is the Semi-Independent Living Program. This type of assistance is appropriate for individuals who do not need 24 hour per day supervision, but do need regular assistance in the form of training or supervision. Halpern, Close, and Nelson (1985) studied the lives of approximately 300 adults with mental retardation who were served in over 30 Semi-Independent Living Programs in California, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington. These programs provided occasional and limited help to adults with mental retardation who typically lived in apartment settings. The study focused on the questions of who was being served by the programs, the quality of the residential environment, the clients' vocational and financial status, the quality of clients' personal relationships and leisure activities, and the characteristics of the Semi-Independent Living Programs.

Another type of program is the group home. This is an appropriate alternative for people who need extensive supervision or who are in the process of making an extended transition to independent living. While a group home may be part of the Least Restrictive Environment for some individuals, care must be taken to ensure that life in the home does not unduly restrict the individuals living there. Moise (1980) and Summers and Reese (1985) provide some criteria for evaluating group homes. Bersani (1986) tells about the use of parents and advocates in monitoring community residential facilities. He makes a strong argument for such monitoring as a supplement to professional review.

#### **Social Dimensions of Independence A Least Restrictive Environment**

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provides opportunities for persons with disabilities to develop the normal range of relationships, from the most casual to the most intimate. Unfortunately, it is often the case that persons with disabilities can become socially isolated. In the survey of persons served by the Semi-Independent Living Programs, Halpern, Close, and Nelson (1985) reported that loneliness was a major issue for the people in the sample, with 46% reporting that they often felt lonely.

Some of the publications that have been developed to teach independent living skills include information on how to develop social skills. For instance, Leavitt and Terrell (1984) include a unit which lists goals for teaching social skills and teaching activities that can be used to help students develop those skills.

In addition to the pleasure and joy that friendship provides, it can play a critical role in helping a person with a disability achieve and maintain his or her independence. Friends who are in fact "benefactors" are critical to the success of persons with mental retardation living in the community. Halpern, Close, and Nelson (1985) discuss the fact that around one half of the persons served by Semi-Independent Living Programs report having one or more friends who are filling the role of benefactor.

#### **Independence and Work**

Employment is an important part of the Least Restrictive Environment. However, many people with disabilities are unable to find work or are limited to employment in sheltered workshops where they usually earn less than the minimum wage.

Over the past several years, parents, government officials, and professionals have shown an increased interest in programs targeted at ex-

panding employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. Part of the reason for this change is the fact that many students who were part of the first generation of students receiving services under PL 94-142 have found it difficult to make the transition from school to work.

■ Some of the actions that have been taken include:

1. Both the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) of the U.S. Department of Education and the Administration on Developmental Disabilities (ADD) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have developed initiatives aimed at increasing employment of persons with disabilities and assisting in the transition from school to work (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1986).

2. The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), which replaced the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA), has provided assistance to persons with disabilities in communities throughout the country. Tindall, Gugerty, and Dougherty (1985) describe projects under JTPA that are benefitting persons with disabilities and outline the steps required in developing similar programs.

3. The Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act earmarks 10% of the monies allocated to the states under the Act for vocational education for persons with handicaps. It also has several provisions designed to increase access by students with disabilities to vocational education and to improve the quality of instruction. Readers who wish a detailed description of the provisions of the Act should contact NICHCY, P.O. Box 1492, Washington, DC 20013.



4. In response to the difficulties encountered in finding employment opportunities for young people with severe disabilities and as an attempt to provide alternatives to day activity programs, model supported work programs have been developed (Wehman and Kregel, 1985; Kierman and Stark, 1986). This approach to competitive employment involves highly structured job placement, training, and follow-up. It is typified by intensive job site training in integrated, community-based employment settings. Mank, Rhodes, and Bellamy, (1986) discuss four model supported work programs. OSERS and ADD have jointly funded a series of projects which will develop a prototype for how supported employment services can be delivered on a statewide basis. The following states are now conducting five year OSERS/ADD funded projects on supported work: Alaska, Arizona, California, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Utah, Virginia, and Washington.

Readers wishing to obtain a list of the Project Coordinators in each of these states should contact: NICHCY, P.O. Box 1492, Washington, DC 20013.

#### **Postsecondary Education**

Over the last decade, the participation of persons with disabilities in postsecondary education has greatly increased. Education after high school includes programs which may or may not lead to a degree or certificate; may teach academic, technical, vocational, or personal skills; and are offered in a variety of settings including community-based institutions, career schools, or colleges and universities. Postsecondary education may be especially important for young persons with disabilities to learn the skills they need in an age

appropriate setting in order to ensure quality life participation in the Least Restrictive Environment. The HEATH (Higher Education and the Handicapped) Resource Center operates the National Clearinghouse on Postsecondary Education for Handicapped Individuals which serves as an information exchange about educational support services, policies, procedures, adaptations, and opportunities on American campuses. HEATH provides information on vocational-technical schools, adult education programs, independent living centers, and other post high school education and training entities. Call or write: HEATH, One Dupont Circle, N.W., Suite 670, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 939-9320 (Voice/TDD) or Toll-Free 800-54-HEATH.

#### **Independence and Self-Advocacy**

Adults with disabilities need to be self-advocates in order to move toward the Least Restrictive Environment and to preserve it once they have attained it. Dragona (1985) describes his experience in advocating for his needs and those of other students with disabilities while attending Fairleigh Dickinson University. In another example of self-advocacy, Varela (1985) describes the struggle of Jesse Davis to reverse a court ruling that declared him incompetent and to gain greater control over his life. It is significant that the turning point for Davis occurred when he became involved in a self-advocacy group, United Together. Such groups have become a focal point for advocacy by persons who have mental retardation and other developmental disabilities. Williams and Shoultz (1984) describe the development of several self-advocacy groups including People First of Oregon, Project 2 of Nebraska and similar projects in England. The

authors offer practical advice on developing self-advocacy programs. In a similar way, Independent Living Centers have become a resource for persons with disabilities in advocating for their own needs.

Materials have been written to help in developing self-advocacy skills. Apolloni (1984) describes a model for self-advocacy which is based on a survey of adults with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, and service providers. The author describes a four stage self-advocacy cycle. In the first stage the individual identifies his or her needs and the agencies, if any, that can be helpful in meeting these needs. Next, the self-advocate prepares to participate with service professionals in decision making sessions on how best to meet the identified needs. The third stage focuses on influencing decision makers to adopt the approach favored by the self-advocate. Finally, the self-advocate checks to make sure that the agreed upon action is taken. The cycle is continuous. As circumstances change, new needs are identified and new efforts must be made to obtain services.

Young people with disabilities can gain valuable experience in self-advocacy by participating in their own Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings during the last several years they are in school.

In summary, the Least Restrictive Environment at school, at work, and at home is that environment which allows persons with disabilities to participate to the maximum extent possible in everyday life and to have control over the decisions that affect them. It is an environment that provides needed supports in such a way that they do not interfere with personal liberty. Whatever supports are used do not interfere with a person's access to the normal events of life.

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Copies of most of these documents can be obtained through your local library. In most cases, we have included the publisher's address or some other source in the event the publication is not available in your area.

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News Digest is a product of the National Information Center for Handicapped Children and Youth under Cooperative Agreement G0034C3500 between the U.S. Department of Education and Interstate Research Associates, Rosslyn, VA. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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