



Retaining Teachers of Color in Our Public Schools

A Critical Need for Action

By Glenda L. Partee June 2014

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Introduction and summary

As a nation, we need to undertake strategic efforts to retain and increase the number of effective teachers of color in our educator workforce. Teachers of color are significantly underrepresented in the public school population, despite the fact that the number of students of color is growing rapidly. We must make sure that all students—especially this new stream of diverse learners from different cultural and language backgrounds—have access to not only high-quality education opportunities but also a high-quality and an equally diverse teaching force. Greater teacher diversity will help ensure that today’s students are prepared to succeed in the future workforce, some in various educator roles.

The first report in this series, “Teacher Diversity Revisited: A New State-by-State Analysis,”¹ explores the growing diversity of the student population in public schools, as well as the shrinking diversity of many state and regional teaching forces. The second report, “The Leaky Pipeline for Teachers of Color: Getting More Teachers of Color into the Classroom,”² tracks how people of color enter and negotiate the educator pipeline, examines critical junctures that limit or expand the participation of people of color in this pipeline, and highlights strategies that need further exploration and intervention.

This report, the third in the series, focuses on the need to retain teachers of color—specifically, those who effectively improve student achievement. It explores reasons for low teacher retention rates and discusses promising retention policies and practices to ensure that the most capable teachers of color enter and remain in our public schools. Our goal is to generate a serious dialogue among educators and policymakers, as well as within communities of color and among their representatives, about the actions necessary to appreciably increase the numbers of effective teachers of color in public schools. We need to be committed to retaining these teachers and ensuring that they are major components of a diverse and competent workforce.

This report's findings include:

- **Retention is key to retaining more teachers of color.** Research on the retention and turnover of teachers of color closely parallels research on new teachers, who also leave the profession at disproportionately high rates.³ It is critical that we give attention to the needs of both of these groups. While much has been done in the past 25 years to substantially increase the numbers of teachers of color in public schools, high levels of attrition offset these successes.⁴
- **Teachers of color are crucial to all schools.** Teachers of color are more likely to work and remain in high-poverty, hard-to-staff urban schools and districts than their white counterparts; in fact, they often consider it an important duty to do so.⁵ What's more, teachers of color are known to be personally committed to the success of children of color, and they affect a wide range of student academic outcomes. They also serve as powerful role models for all students and prove that teaching can be a viable career for people of color.
- **The conditions that teachers of color face in high-poverty, hard-to-staff urban schools and districts work against their success and longevity in these schools, as well as in the profession as a whole.**⁶ Factors that support teacher retention are amenable to social, cultural, financial, and human resource policy changes well within the capacity of schools and districts to address.⁷

Based on these findings, state, district, and school leaders, as appropriate, should take the following steps to increase the numbers of—and retain—effective teachers of color in our public schools:

- Provide innovative teacher-preparation approaches in university-based and alternative-certification programs, new frameworks for transitioning from trainees to fully functioning, effective teachers and supporting novice teachers, and career development for teachers of color that focuses on ways to explicitly support and retain educators who can be successful in schools with high proportions of students of color.
- Address conditions in urban, hard-to-staff schools that compromise the effectiveness and retention of teachers of color.

Communities of color, their advocates, and policymakers, should:

- Develop a priority focus on attaining a more diverse and representative teacher workforce, with the specific goal of having local and state workforces reflect the racial, ethnic, and linguistic compositions of classrooms.
- Require teachers to be well grounded in the subjects they teach and effective at ensuring our children learn and achieve.
- Press for actions to support and retain effective teachers.

Together, state, district, and local school leaders—as well as organized communities of color—can begin to remedy the low representation of people of color in the teaching force. States and districts can work to enforce needed changes in teacher preparation and support to increase the retention of teachers of color. For their part, communities of color can work to highlight the need to develop and support more effective teachers of color in our schools and steer more capable individuals toward the profession.

Background

Teachers of color are a subset of a profession that is currently undergoing many challenges affecting the level of teacher turnover. Among these challenges are a perceived loss of prestige; a low bar for entry, preparation, and credentialing at a time when more students need the highest-quality teaching available; stagnant approaches to the way teachers are trained, promoted, and compensated; and antiquated pension systems that do not align with the mobility, aspirations, and career patterns of today's educators.⁸

Teachers are also undergoing new, more rigorous evaluations of their classroom performance, which will affect personnel decisions and prescriptions for support and improvement.⁹ These actions are the result of current public policy, which is based on the belief that teachers should be accountable for student growth and achievement and that the results of evaluations should support improvement in teaching quality. Barring improvement, ineffective teachers should be counseled to consider other fields of employment or be dismissed. This will allow classrooms to be populated with the most diverse, effective teachers with the greatest potential for success.

In addition to facing these challenges and changes in the field, teachers of color have the added distinction of being significantly underrepresented in their profession at a time when students of color are emerging as the dominant sector of the public school population. (See text box)

Demographic trends of students and teachers of color

- **At the national level, students of color make up almost half of the public school population.** In contrast, teachers of color—those who are not non-Hispanic whites—make up only 18 percent of the teaching force, and almost every state has a large teacher diversity gap. In a number of states, this gap is widening.¹⁰

- **These figures contrast with the makeup of the general population.** In 2012, non-Hispanic whites comprised almost two-thirds—63 percent—of the total population; people of color comprised the remaining 37 percent: 16.9 percent were Hispanic, 13.1 percent were African American, 5.1 percent were Asian, 2.4 percent were people of two or more races, 1.2 percent were American Indian

and Alaska Native, and 0.2 percent were Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander.¹¹ The adult population reflects similar proportions: In 2012, non-Hispanic whites made up 66 percent of the adult population, while people of color made up 33 percent.¹²

- **The composition of students of color in public schools is changing.** Between 2011 and 2022, enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools will increase 7 percent. During this time, the enrollment of Hispanic students will increase by 33 percent; the enrollment of Asian students will increase by 20 percent; and the enrollment of African American students will increase by 2 percent. The greatest increases will be seen in the South and the West.¹³

Access to effective teaching and high-quality educational opportunities

The education literature supports the need to recruit and retain greater numbers of teachers of color in response to changing student demographics.¹⁴ As a rapidly growing segment of the population, students of color will require high-quality educational opportunities, including access to effective teaching as they progress toward postsecondary education and careers. This is important because research demonstrates that effective instruction has more influence on student performance than do other school resources.¹⁵ It is also well documented that disadvantaged students—who are likely to be students of color—receive less-effective teaching than their white counterparts, which contributes to overall achievement gaps.¹⁶

These students need high-quality educational opportunities; they also need to be exposed to a wide range of cultural and linguistic experiences. One way to ensure this occurs is by providing them with educator role models of diverse races and ethnicities.¹⁷ Of particular concern is these students' exposure to male teachers of color, who are significantly underrepresented in our schools.¹⁸ In response, the U.S. Department of Education has launched a national recruitment campaign in search of more diverse, highly qualified teachers, as well as a five-year initiative—fronted by MSNBC contributor Jeff Johnson and other public figures—to train, place, and develop 80,000 African American teachers by 2015.¹⁹

Emerging research reflects the positive impacts that teachers of color have on a range of academic outcomes for students of color, including school attendance, retention, standardized test scores, advanced-level course enrollment, and college-going rates.²⁰ For example, a study of the relationship between the presence of African American teachers in schools and African American students' access to equal education in schools found that fewer African Americans were placed in special-education classes, suspended, or expelled when they had more teachers of color, and that more African American students were placed in gifted and talented programs and graduated from high school.²¹ These findings are attributed to teachers' of color affinity for infusing their classrooms with culturally relevant experiences and examples, setting high academic expectations, developing trusting student-teacher relationships, and serving as cultural and linguistic resources—as well as advocates, mentors, and liaisons—for students' families and communities.²²

These findings do not mean that all teachers of color achieve these benefits or that white teachers cannot or do not. They do mean, however, that efforts must be made to aggressively train, recruit, and retain effective teachers of all races and ethnicities to prepare new, larger youth populations—many of which are largely made up of first- and second-generation immigrants—for postsecondary education and careers.

The revolving door

One way to remedy the low numbers of teachers of color in public schools is to staunch their exodus by promoting higher retention rates. This is critical, as teachers of color are more likely to work in public schools that serve high-minority, high-poverty urban communities than their white counterparts.²³ Additionally, teachers of color are often motivated by humanistic commitments to improve the lives of low-income students and students of color and to bridge the cultural gap that many of these students experience in school.²⁴ Over the past two decades, the growth in number of teachers of color has almost doubled, outpacing the growth of white teachers. However, successful efforts to recruit more teachers of color to schools in disadvantaged areas are largely negated by the revolving door of attrition: In general, teachers of color have higher turnover rates than do other teachers.²⁵ Moreover, male teachers of color are more than two times as likely as female teachers of color to leave the field.²⁶

There are many reasons for the underrepresentation of effective teachers of color, including inadequate early academic preparation, which leaves too many people of color unprepared for a teaching career; it can manifest as failure to graduate from high school, to enter and succeed in postsecondary education, or to pass competency tests at the teacher-preparation or certification level. Other reasons include inadequate high school counseling; expanded opportunities in other careers; limited access to higher education or high-quality teacher-preparation programs due to socioeconomic circumstances; the amount of discrimination people of color experienced en route to the teaching field; or general dissatisfaction with the teaching profession, a result of low salaries and low occupational prestige.²⁷

Once in the classroom, challenging teaching conditions and a lack of professional and administrative support quickly drive teachers of color from the profession. Exiting teachers cite poor preparation, insufficient classroom support, and limited opportunities for career advancement as reasons for leaving.²⁸

The following sections highlight some factors linked to low teacher retention and high turnover.

Challenging teaching conditions

High turnover for teachers in general is attributed to poor working conditions in high-poverty, urban communities. These conditions include lower salaries than those in low-poverty school districts, concerns about school safety, larger class sizes, limited instructional resources and professional-learning opportunities, low student achievement, and high rates of discipline problems.²⁹

But while certain factors—including large numbers of students in poverty or high concentrations of students of color—are strongly related to whether white teachers stay at or leave a school, this is not the case with teachers of color. For these teachers, organizational conditions—such as low levels of administrative support, lack of classroom autonomy, and lack of collective faculty decision-making influence—often trump financial and resource factors, including money for instructional materials and professional-development opportunities.³⁰ Based on these findings, education researchers Richard Ingersoll and Henry May recommend that among other policy-amenable aspects, high-minority, urban schools should shift their focus to improving organizational conditions to increase their chances of retaining teachers.³¹ For example, if policymakers and administrators implement more coherent human resource approaches, they can positively affect the ways in which schools are organized, managed, and operated.³²

Professional support and opportunities for career advancement

Researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education examined the stages of the teaching career, paying particular attention to the kinds of support and advancement opportunities that could influence a teacher's decision to remain in a school or to leave the profession.³³ The researchers' focus was not on teachers of color, but their findings are nonetheless applicable to teachers of color at various stages of their careers.

Researcher Susan Moore Johnson and her colleagues found the highest turnover rates in the early and later stages of the teaching career. The degree to which new teachers felt they were teaching students well was an important driver of their persistence. The researchers found that high-quality mentoring—while rare—and

first-year teachers' induction into the teaching profession are associated with improved satisfaction and retention of new teachers. Meanwhile, the researchers found that the following strategies boosted the retention of experienced teachers: high-quality professional development that helped them hone their craft and develop new skills; new and differentiated roles, including leadership roles outside the classroom; and career ladders that provided increasing levels of responsibility and leadership or that rewarded outstanding teaching practices.³⁴

Certification, gender, and group affiliation

Gender and certification status are also significant, unique predictors of whether teachers of color leave the field. Male teachers of color are more than two times as likely to leave teaching as are female teachers of color, and teachers of color who are certified in their main teaching field are only half as likely to leave the field as are other teachers.³⁵ Researchers Hilary Kissel, Patrick Meyer, and Xiaofeng Liu concluded that the current move toward enforcing teachers' certification in their primary teaching fields should help improve retention of teachers of color.³⁶

Another factor that affects male teachers of color is group affiliation. Researchers Travis Bristol and Ron Ferguson found that African American male teachers were more content at their schools and less likely to leave their current school if they were not the sole male of color there; they preferred to be part of a group of African American male teachers.³⁷ According to the study, respondents who were the only African American men on the faculty indicated a greater desire to leave their current schools, even in a slow economy, than did respondents with four or more African American men on the faculty.³⁸

Alternative, short-term certification programs³⁹

Betty Achinstein and her colleagues found that retention rates in the overall teacher workforce tended to be lower for teachers who attended alternative, short-term certification programs than they were for teachers who attended traditional college-based preparation programs. Although no study has directly examined if this pattern holds true for teachers of color, research has revealed that higher proportions of teachers of color received their preparation in alternative programs, compared to white teachers, who tend to graduate from traditional, university-based programs.⁴⁰

Critics of these alternative programs say they offer shortcuts into teaching, often lack rigor, and do not provide enough clinical experience before placement in the classroom. Research on these programs has yielded mixed results with respect to the performance of their graduates compared to the performance of traditional route graduates.⁴¹ Nevertheless, these programs offer options for a more diverse group of future teachers than traditional teacher-certification programs. Significantly, they appeal to career-changers: individuals who did not pursue an education major in college, but seek to give back to their communities by entering the profession. Such programs should be preserved, and their quality should be enhanced.

Policy recommendations

Improvements in retention start at initial preparation and continue through certification into the profession and the critical first years of teaching. As discussed above, retention is dependent on teaching conditions and relies in part on the individual’s motivation for teaching, as well as what they view as the potential for a successful and rewarding career.

Researchers who have reviewed studies of retention and turnover rates for teachers of color conclude that solutions are largely within the realms of public policy and parallel research on teacher retention in the larger workforce, including research on the retention of new teachers. Turnover for new teachers is particularly acute: Up to 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within five years.⁴² Researchers also indicate that there is much we do not know about the factors critical to retaining teachers of color, and that more can be done to inform supportive and retention policies.⁴³

Recommendations for improving the retention of teachers of color are discussed below. Some apply to all teachers—such as improving teaching effectiveness for diverse student populations—and some are specific to retaining effective teachers of color. We focus first on actions that states, districts, and school leaders can take. We then shift our attention to actions and advocacy efforts that communities of color should consider.

States, districts, and school leaders

As appropriate, states and school districts and local leaders should strive to prepare, support, develop, and retain effective teachers, particularly new teachers and teachers of color.

Before they reach the classroom, teachers need to be prepared. States should therefore incentivize producers to develop innovative approaches to teacher preparation in both university-based and alternative-certification programs. Districts and schools should develop new frameworks to support these teachers as they transition into their jobs and develop their skills. They should also allow teachers of color to develop in their jobs in ways that support their retention. This is particularly important for teachers of color who can work successfully in schools that have high proportions of students of color.

Below, we explore each of these ideas in greater detail. It should be noted, however, that more research is needed on teacher retention; according to Achinstein and her colleagues, these approaches significantly improve retention rates, but more work is needed to verify program impacts and to identify specific characteristics that contribute to the retention of teachers of color.⁴⁴

Reform teacher preparation in ways that produce greater numbers of effective teachers

Harvard University researcher Thomas J. Kane proposes a new model of teacher training that combines reforms from different sources of initial training, including higher admission standards for teacher-training programs, higher-quality training that includes clinical training, and greater selectivity in what teachers go to what schools, in terms of grade-point averages and performance evidence.⁴⁵ These actions would help elevate the status of teaching by focusing on the most capable, highest-performing candidates, providing them with the best theoretical and real-world experiences, and ensuring that they are competent and classroom-ready teachers upon graduation.

As it currently stands, however, teacher preparation in this country is not consistently of high quality. We need to improve basic preparation measures to produce competent and school-ready graduates who have the greatest chance of success in challenging school settings and with diverse student populations. The text box below explores the deficits of teacher-preparation programs.

Put simply, the current teacher-preparation model does not do enough to ensure that the best candidates are ready for teaching jobs, especially those in low-income urban settings and those with diverse student populations. In addition to higher admissions standards, there is a need for greater collaboration between teacher-preparation programs and the school districts likely to hire program graduates. This will ensure that the training these programs provide aligns with the classroom and student needs of the districts.

The call for greater selectivity in program admissions and initial selection has been met with concern that these actions will further limit the number of potential teachers of color. Researchers attribute increased standards in the field, in mandated assessments, and in licensure examinations to the shortage in teachers of color.⁴⁷

The nuances of program selectivity, improved standards, and their impacts on teachers of color are beyond the scope of this report. However, it should be noted that selectivity, quality, and diversity are not mutually exclusive. The National Council on Teacher Quality's 2013 report⁴⁸ identifies 83 undergraduate and graduate education programs that earn a "Strong Design" designation because of their selectivity, high quality, and the fact that they produce a diverse group of graduates.⁴⁹ There is a need for more teacher-preparation programs to embrace calls for higher quality and candidate expectations—indeed, to marry the call for quality and diversity. Improved preparation will go a long way toward minimizing the number of new teachers that enter our schools ill-equipped and quickly exit through the revolving door.

The same holds true for alternative-certification routes. Although these programs have been an important source of male teachers and male teachers of color in the past—especially for hard-to-staff districts and subjects—they must provide rigorous preparation and ongoing support to their trainees to help them meet high standards of effectiveness in classrooms with diverse student populations. In this way, we can ensure that these classrooms retain effective teachers.

Quality components are in short supply in teacher-preparation programs

According to the National Council on Teacher Quality,⁴⁶ only one in four teacher-preparation programs in the United States restricts admissions to the top half of the college-going population. Furthermore, a large majority—71 percent—does not provide elementary teacher candidates with practical, research-based training in reading instruction methods, and almost all programs—93 percent—fail to ensure a high-quality student-teaching experience in which candidates are assigned to highly skilled teachers and receive frequent concrete feedback. Furthermore, only 11 percent of elementary programs and 47 percent of secondary programs provide teachers with adequate content preparation in the subjects they will teach.

Develop models and frameworks for teaching in high-need schools

Beyond the basic measures of quality discussed above, states, districts, and school leaders need to do much more to design frameworks for teaching in high-need schools. They should focus on the teaching of specific subjects and how best to work with English language learners and special-needs students, as well as with low-income families.⁵⁰ Barnett Berry—founder and president of the Center for Teaching Quality, an education advocacy organization—and his colleagues recommend that higher-education institutions collaborate with school districts, local education funds, and other community-based organizations to develop programs that endorse new teachers who have learned to work with these groups and who are prepared to lead.

Efforts that focus on the first years of teaching are important to combat the sink-or-swim environments that too many new teachers—both white and those of color—experience and that determine their effectiveness and retention in high-need schools. High-quality teacher residencies, mentor programs, and comprehensive induction can bring targeted support and real-world experience into the training framework.⁵¹ Berry recommends improving preparation by expanding urban teacher residency models, or UTRs.⁵² Through UTRs, teacher candidates receive practical learning experience and the support network they need to be effective in real-life classrooms. Early studies looking at program graduates' effectiveness and high retention rates suggest that these models hold great promise for preparing and supporting teachers in high-need urban schools.⁵³

To effectively put these models into practice, it is important to incentivize experienced teachers of color to work in schools with high concentrations of students of color and in multicultural communities with expanded career pathways, additional professional supports, and recognitions such as advanced certification and higher pay. In this manner, teachers of color can become teacher leaders—master teachers, mentors, coaches, and team leaders—furthering efforts to improve teaching quality in these schools. States, districts, and schools should thus consider what training, supports, and incentives are most appropriate for veteran teachers of color.

Maintain high levels of job performance

As noted earlier, teachers leave schools and the field because they feel unprepared for the job and unsupported in the classroom. They also leave if they feel unrewarded and if they see few opportunities for career advancement. This leads to the churn of novice and less-effective teachers among low-performing schools and out of teaching,⁵⁴ while more effective teachers tend to move to less-challenging, low-poverty and low-minority schools.⁵⁵ For these reasons, it is important to guarantee that all schools, especially those with the highest-need students, have effective teachers.

States and districts are in different stages of creating and implementing new, more rigorous teacher evaluation and support systems to inform personnel decisions, support improvements in instruction, and determine which students and schools have access to highly effective teachers. Teacher-evaluation results are necessary to identify and retain all teachers, but they are especially useful tools to identify, nurture, and retain effective teachers of color.

Therefore, evaluation results should be categorized by teacher characteristics—race, ethnicity, gender, age, and experience level. Schools and districts should use data from these systems to assess teachers’ effectiveness levels, to improve the weakest teachers through high-quality professional supports, and to identify schools with limited numbers of effective teachers of color. These data should also be used to determine rewards, compensation, and ways to align the skills of highly effective teachers with the needs of students and other teachers.⁵⁶

Address conditions in urban, hard-to-staff schools that compromise the effectiveness and retention of teachers of color

Our schools need teachers of color who are committed to serving students of color and students from low-income racial and cultural communities, and can improve overall student achievement. According to Achinstein and her colleagues,⁵⁷ districts must build on teachers’ humanistic commitments to serving students of color through policies and programs that value these commitments. Districts must also couple these policies with actual improvements in schools’ working conditions.

To attract and keep teachers of color, these schools will need social, human, cultural, and financial resources, as well as organizational structures that support and empower teachers through greater classroom authority and faculty influence. Districts and schools must prioritize efforts to eliminate unwelcoming conditions for teachers and students of color by embracing the multicultural composition of the student body, eliminating negative attitudes about students of color, jettisoning low expectations for these students' achievement, promoting culturally relevant teaching, and minimizing teacher controls and constraints.⁵⁸

Retaining effective teachers of color also involves developing rewards and incentives for the most effective teachers to work in these schools and lead other teachers in professional-learning communities focused on improving student outcomes. As noted earlier, this involves developing career pathways and other informed human resource strategies for teachers of color. Given the overwhelming presence of white teachers in the workforce, it also means providing better training for white teachers and administrators in how to foster and support optimum conditions for diverse groups of students and teachers.

Communities of color, advocates, and policymakers

Communities of color and those who advocate for them should develop a priority focus on retaining a more diverse, representative, and effective teacher workforce. Ultimately, both local and state workforces should reflect the racial, ethnic, and linguistic composition of students in the classroom.

Address the imbalance between students and teachers of color

It is to students' benefit to have strong educators and role models who look like them and who share their cultural experiences; this can only help improve their levels of achievement. Therefore, communities of color should work with their members, as well as government agencies and their networks of community-based organizations, to generate interest in and support for the teaching profession among potential candidates of color.

Communities of color must also work to identify and alleviate the underlying reasons for the underrepresentation of teachers of color in public schools. These reasons may include poor preparation at the high school level; inadequate counseling; limited access to high-quality preparation and certification programs; and the school conditions, discussed above, which cause teachers of color to leave the profession.

Ensure teachers are well grounded in their subject areas

Communities of color should make sure that all teachers meet and adhere to a basic requirement to be well versed in their subject areas. Only teachers who are informed about what they teach can effectively help students learn and achieve.

No matter their race or ethnicity, effective teachers are a premium; parents and community members should demand nothing less for their students. However, the extent to which students—and students of color in particular—derive additional value from a more representative teacher workforce is important and should be taken into consideration. Communities of color should therefore press for the retention and support of effective teachers of color.

Conclusion

Through a concerted and sustained effort, we can achieve a more diverse and effective teaching force. The strategies presented above are a good start, but they alone will not be sufficient. Much more must be done to develop effective teachers who can keep up with the major demographic shifts currently taking place in the student population.

States and school districts have the power to remove barriers to the retention and success of teachers of color. Those that do not address these barriers—by, for example, supporting high-quality teaching and reforming school conditions—will continue to face high turnover, destabilized faculties, and unsatisfactory student achievement levels. Communities of color must advocate for effective teaching and encourage their children to prepare to enter a rigorous and demanding profession. This report’s findings underscore not only the need for a renewed policy focus on retaining the most effective teachers of color but also on supporting efforts to prepare teachers to be successful in classrooms with highly diverse student populations.

About the author

Glenda L. Partee formerly served as the Associate Director for Teacher Quality at the Center for American Progress. Her work focused on improvements in human capital systems in our public schools. Prior to joining CAP, she was an independent education consultant who advised and wrote for local and state school systems, education associations, foundations, and nonprofit organizations on diverse issues.

From 2005 to 2009, Partee served in a number of capacities at the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, including as director of policy, research, and analysis, and assistant superintendent for postsecondary education and workforce readiness. Previously, she was co-director of the American Youth Policy Form and held positions at the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education. She was a member of the New York City Urban Teacher Corps and taught in schools in New York City and St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands.

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