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Fostering Excellence through Social Justice Principles in Schools Serving English Learners

Nilka Avilés, Ed.D.

The school principal is central to providing an equitable learning experience for all students. Research identifies an empirical correlation between the quality of school leadership and greater student achievement (Bryk, et al., 2010; Fullan, 2016). Facing challenges to improve teaching and learning in the current context of high-stakes testing and accountability and as they contend with discrimination, inequities and injustices in the status quo, effective school leaders approach their work through a social justice lens. They build a culture dedicated to equity and excellence for all students. Howard (2016) states that school leaders must strive to fight the inequities of implicit and explicit biases and oppressive practices that impact student achievement and support the success of all students.

Educational leaders are most effective when they operate from an asset-based approach of the social, emotional, economic and cognitive conditions of their students (Theoharis & Brooks, 2012). In doing so, they lead their staff to carry out instruction that builds on students’ unique strengths and is responsive to students’ needs. Educators can then work to ensure the educational and psychological support is provided with efficacious cognitive strategies, robust content knowledge, positive relationships and meaningful support.

Starting with the social justice point of view facilitates building social and cultural capital and provides students with enhanced and deepened learning experiences that counteract the challeng-

es of injustices. Successful leaders support educators to reflect on current practices and urgently improve those that do not work.

Leaders with a social justice lens support inclusive practices that meet a wide array of needs. Fullan (2016) asserts that these leaders seek to restructure staff allocation and assess student progress through the disaggregation and analysis of data, striving to create an environment with equal access and equitable support for all students. They recognize the importance of valuing students’ race, language, ethnicity, family income, ability, gender and sexual orientation as assets in supporting student success in school (Gorski, 2013).

By constantly monitoring students’ progress (in ways other than standardized tests), principals uncover constructs that create differences in student learning. They develop intentional infrastructures to improve learning outcomes, equipping staff to build their own capacity to serve all students. These leaders also understand the critical roles that families and community organizations play, welcoming them to the school as partners and as equals to ensuring all students receive a quality education.

Through IDRA’s School TurnAround and Reenergizing for Success (STAARS) Leaders project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, we have been working in the San Antonio ISD SIG (School Improvement Grant) eligible schools to help build capacity for strengthening the leadership pipeline and transforming schools with sig-
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“The challenge before us is not that the faces of our nation’s children are changing. Our challenge is not our children at all, but rather our capacity, commitment and will as adults to achieve excellence in education for all students – every one.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

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nificant numbers of English learners (ELs). We began our work last year by partnering with the district to assist principals and leadership teams with comprehensive professional development designed to serve their culturally diverse student population.

In addition, IDRA is providing differentiated professional development to five principals and their leadership teams in the form of coaching and mentoring. We have provided the district's central office staff and leaders from other schools comprehensive professional development based on their needs and a set of core competencies. These competencies empower leaders to reflect on their behaviors, build on their strengths and work on their individual challenges so that they can impact student success during their transformation.

One of these exemplary leaders is Greg Rivers, M.A., principal of Ball Academy. He spoke with us recently in a new Classnotes podcast interview about his experience with the seven competencies that the district selected to focus on during their participation in the project. The full podcast interview is available via iTunes or on the IDRA website (<http://budurl.com/IDRApod168>).

Competency 1: Driving for Results

Effective leaders focus on intentional teaching and learning results. They have a strong desire for achieving successful outcomes through task-oriented actions. These include focus, achievement, initiative, persistence, monitoring with practical and intentional reasoning that direct one to actions, and accountability.

Mr. Rivers explained: "I put a lot of thought into placing staff members in the right positions so they are successful in their work. You have to hire good people to influence students in a powerful way and to make the changes you envision.



Greg Rivers, M.A., principal, Ball Academy, and Nilka Avilés, Ed.D., IDRA senior education associate.

You have to evaluate what is going on and make tweaks to make sure the school is functioning properly. So, talent management matters to me.

"Then, we structure where all stakeholders are involved and have a voice in how the school runs, knowing that their voices matter. For example, I listen a lot to parents and what they are telling me. We administered surveys at the beginning of the year to find out what they need and what they think their child needs in order to be successful. Structures for stakeholder voices have to be operating at a peak performance and, if not, we take a look at the structures, and we bring all the stakeholders in and change it as needed."

Competency 2: Influencing for Results

An effective principal focuses on developing collective efficacy, motivating and influencing their thinking and behaviors to obtain productive results. This includes impact and influence, team leadership and building the capacity of others. Influential leaders seek opportunities that support academic learning reflecting on social justice

objectives through professional growth that models, supports and provides feedback, which leads to the success of all students.

Mr. Rivers described: "One thing I do is to try to shrink the change that we want to have. You have to be very thoughtful of the things we do, not having just a lot of new programs and activities. Any time you bring in something new, you need to have professional learning and a very structured way to do things. I call these checkpoints. If I say, "Do x and y," I really need to pull back and concentrate on x and provide learning time and feedback in that area. Teachers need support via coaching. I think that's the missing piece for teachers. We want to see something happen because, if we've invested in it and if we think it's important, then we are going to expect it – and then inspect it to make sure that it is functioning."

Competency 3: Problem-Solving

This competency means simplifying and resolving complex challenges through job-embedded practices, reflection and logical analysis, data-informed decisions, identifying root causes of school barriers and the impact of accomplishing the organizational goals. Effective leaders ensure strong connections between school learning goals and classroom activity.

Mr. Rivers communicated how he used conceptual thinking to identify and address the problems that arise: "We do a root cause analysis. We started that in the summer. For example, if a teacher comes to me and says this person can't read. First I ask, what does that mean? Let's dig deeper. He doesn't know any sight words? What is causing the student to not be where he or she should be? We are getting teachers to analyze the root causes by asking, "why, why, why?" Then we can come up with a plan to address the issues. We bring all stakeholders to the table."

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School Leadership Transforming Schools with Linguistically Diverse Student Populations

by Kristin Grayson, M.Ed.

School leaders have been increasingly facing new challenges with the rapid changing demographics of their schools. Sometimes, the schools they attended as children and then taught in as teachers are no longer the same. The buildings look unchanged on the outside, but a glance inside reveals a significantly more diverse student population.

In some cases, these changes occurred gradually; in others they moved quickly as new families moved into the area to live and to work in an ever changing economy. For example, the IDRA EAC-South helps small rural districts with fewer than 1,000 students adapt to a student population that is now 40 percent English learners from multiple language groups, and we work with large urban districts that now have majority minority students with 70 percent of students being English learners from multiple language groups.

Challenges school leaders face include presenting appropriate curriculum for English learners who arrive with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds; preparing teachers to serve newcomers (under 12 months in the United States); integrating the needs of students who have had interrupted formal schooling or no schooling at all; addressing the needs of students who are refugees from war-torn areas who have experienced unspeakable trauma, as well as students who were born in the United States and have attended other schools but have never acquired proficient academic English; and adopting a social justice perspective that transcends the school vision, culture and instruction.

This article gives recommendations based on IDRA's change model. The IDRA Quality Schools Action Framework™ is based on experience and empirical evidence that emerges from existing theories of change. The model comprises elements for assessing a school's conditions and outcomes, for identifying leverage points for improvement, and for informing action.

The framework begins with the desired outcome: all students, including those who have entered as

English learners, will graduate from high school, prepared for college and career. The model identifies leadership as one of the essential levers of change. In fact, some research finds the principal to be the most influential individual in the school for the success of programs for English learners (Reyes, 2006).

Following are recommendations for leaders of linguistically diverse schools.

Embrace the new normal and model this in your school by getting to know your EL students. Greet them and their parents using the correct pronunciation of their names. Validate their identity by treating them with respect and kindness. Don't worry if you don't speak their language. Learn something about their culture. Have all cultures represented in the school and have students help decorate hallway bulletin boards that inform others about their cultures, languages and home countries.

Ensure that you and your staff create a welcoming learning environment where all students feel safe and secure. In this inclusive environment, English learners should receive additional support they need while in the mainstream classroom. This can be done through the co-teaching or the push-in model of instruction (where the English teacher is in the general education classroom to aid ELs). Be aware of any bullying or harassment based on language, cultural differences, and/or immigration status and take appropriate action. If these types of issues persist among students, request help from the equity assistance center that serves your state.

Stay up to date about second language acquisition and different program models that your school can use. Make sure all teachers in the school understand the levels of language proficiency and implications for content instruction. Ideally, all staff including administrators will have state ESL certification. Be sure your school and district has its ESL plan detailed in a handbook and that all staff understand the program model. (cont. on Page 4)

Administrators play an essential role in the success of English learners in their schools. While challenging, it is also exciting to transform the school into one that helps all students succeed.

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For more information about the IDRA EAC-South or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or eacsouth@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at <http://www.idra.org/eac-south/>

funded by the U.S. Department of Education

(School Leadership Transforming Schools, continued from Page 3)

The U.S. Department of Education has released new guidance concerning Title II funds (see <http://budurl.com/USDEtII>). Use these funds to prepare, support and retain quality teachers and other administrators who are working with the schools' most vulnerable students. Attend trainings and conferences with your staff each year to stay up-to-date on the latest research. Be a role model for teachers of a professional who is always learning and is current in the field of ESL. Yes, this might take time. But remember that English learners now represent a large percentage of your school's population.

Set high expectations for students and staff by recognizing that each student is valuable and can achieve great results. EL students' home language is a strength that they will use as a foundation for future knowledge and skills. For some students, their parents have risked their lives and made incredible sacrifices so that their children can have a better future. Although some students don't speak any English yet, they still have a home language and experiences sometimes even greater than their age would predict. Help teachers deliver rigorous content classes with appropriate ESL support to prepare English learners as leaders of tomorrow.

Ensure that the school and district's ESL and/or bilingual education program is well implemented. The three prongs of the *Casteñeda vs. Pickard* test for language programs are: (1) that the program is based on research, (2) that the program is implemented with fidelity, and (3) that the program achieves the intended results for students' language proficiency and content achievement. Recall that it can take five to seven years for an English learner to become proficient in the academic English needed for success in school. Use data to inform decision making about any changes to the program implementation.

Build administrator and teacher student self-efficacy. Teachers and administrators not only need the knowledge about English learners, they also must have the will and belief that they can teach them. This self-efficacy is a complex process that is built over time within a supportive and motivating environment and where a sense of collective efficacy is established. Everyone is in this process together.

Strengthen student self-efficacy by establishing a supportive environment that acknowledges students' identities as they learn the content and acquire English proficiency. Along with knowledge and skills, students, supported by teachers and administrators,

acquire the belief in themselves that they can accomplish the difficult and challenging tasks of becoming proficient in English and succeeding in school. With this sense of self, students are better prepared to push through the challenges that they face.

Administrators play an essential role in the success of English learners in their schools. While challenging, it is also exciting to transform the school into one that helps all students succeed.

Resources

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Meet Sulema Carreón-Sánchez, Ph.D. Senior Education Associate

"The difference between perseverance and obstinacy is that one comes from a strong will, and the other from a strong won't."
-Henry Ward Beecher

Dr. Sulema Carreón-Sánchez was born a fourth generation migrant worker. She and her parents, three brothers, and sister used to travel yearly seeking work in the fields of the Panhandle of Texas. Working hard mostly in the cotton fields taught Sulema to persevere in school as well. All of her siblings graduated from the Edgewood School District in San Antonio – Sulema from Memorial High School. She has been married for 40 years and has three children and four adored grandchildren.



Sulema with her mother, Josefa Carreón

Sulema's 40 years in education include working at the Texas Education Agency, IDRA, and at Edgewood, Somerset, Northside, and San Antonio school districts. Her life's devotion has mostly been in working with at-risk students particularly in the area of bilingual education, helping students who, like her, were second language learners living in poverty.

For the past five years, Sulema has spent time researching her family's past and has discovered she has roots from California to Texas and from Montana to Guanajuato, Mexico. This research reflects her family's past, a result of their migrant life, and relatives who have settled throughout the United States. When she is not at her grandchildren's sporting events, Sulema is spending time with her 85-year-old mother, who still drives a car and who continues the tradition of cooking delicious meals for the family. Sulema's father always said, "*Cuando la vida parezca difícil, inténtalo una vez más* [When life seems difficult, try one more time]." This legacy has carried Sulema throughout life, from her migrant childhood through to her devotion to education.

(Fostering Excellence through Social Justice Principles, continued from Page 2)

Competency 4: Showing Confidence to Lead

The leader accomplishes tasks with a strong sense of personal efficacy. This involves staying visibly focused and committed, displaying self-confidence and being self-assured.

“One of the things that we did is cognitive coaching,” said Mr. Rivers. Cognitive coaching, delivered through the IDRA STAARS Leaders project, encourages reflection on the thinking that underlies instructional decision making. “You have to be self-aware. There are days that everything seems to be chaos and on fire and you have to be aware, you can’t seem stressed. Teachers are watching. Do I believe in what I’m saying? Do I believe in the mission statement?”

“There’s a saying that I read once, ‘A relationship is built by one conversation at a time.’ Since I first got here, I’ve had conversations schoolwide, one-on-one and in groups. We can see the walls crumble, and people begin to understand your intentions. Last year, 96 percent of our students were economically disadvantaged, and this year it’s 99 percent. We’re one of the poorest areas in the city, and we feel that we have everything in place to make a difference and that what we are doing follows sound turn-around practices that are research-based.”

Competency 5: Connecting with Student and Family Diversity

A successful leader establishes effective partnerships for student engagement, building culturally responsive and linguistically supportive school-home partnerships to improve teaching and learning.

Mr. Rivers gave some examples: “I started to reflect on what I had done so far by the 11th week of school. How have I engaged parents in learning? Have I included them, and not just to coming to a carnival or other event? So that’s why now we’re training our teachers, and then we’ll start our sessions with parents. I’m doing what we call principal’s coffees and an open house. We’re planning a series of meetings with each grade level to show parents what SMART goals are (specific, measureable, actionable, results oriented, time based) and give them some activities they can do with their children at home to support our work. If a parent has two jobs, then we can work out a schedule to maybe just 10 minutes on a Saturday. Our goal is to make sure parents know they are partners with us. We want to engage with parents as authentic partners in student success.”

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High School Attrition Stories and Resources

In November and early December, IDRA released a series of reports on high school dropout rates in Texas. The news releases, reports, infographics, eBooks, and other resources are available online at: <http://budurl.com/IDRAatrn16>.

Story 1: Despite Graduation Rate Progress, Texas Appears Stuck at Losing One-Fourth of High Schoolers – 31st Annual Texas Public School Attrition Study Released by IDRA

IDRA’s analysis found that the attrition rate in Texas has risen for the first time in 18 years. Though just an increase of 1 percentage point, Texas schools have been losing between 26 percent and 24 percent of high school students annually for the last five years.

Resources:

- **Attrition Study:** Texas Public School Attrition Study 2015-16
- **Infographic:** Texas public schools are losing one out of four students
- **Trend graphs:** See attrition rates and numbers over the last 10 years
- **County List:** Which counties had attrition rates go up or down
- **eBook:** Types of Dropout Data Defined



Story 2: Temporary Policy Relieves High-Stakes for 6,000 Students – Use of Individual Graduation Committees Unlocks Diplomas for Qualified Students

Students who are economically disadvantaged, Latino and African American benefited most from the alternative graduation policy established by the Texas legislature in SB149. The policy is set to expire in 2017.

Resources:

- **Infographic:** Use of individual graduation committees unlocks diplomas for qualified students
- **Factsheet:** Accountability that Doesn’t Hurt Students

Story 3: Texas High Schools Stand to Lose Over 2 Million Students in Coming Years – At Our Current Pace in Texas, Universal High School Education is Two Decades Away

By the time today’s kindergartners are 18, Texas will still not have reached universal high school education. In fact, while today’s toddlers play with board books, they cannot count on earning a diploma. IDRA conducted a supplemental analysis finding that Texas will not reach an attrition rate of zero until 2035-36. At this pace, the state will lose more than 2 million students.

Resources:

- **Infographic:** Texas public schools are losing one out of four students

Story 4: Zero Tolerance Policies Push Students Away – High Attrition Rates of Black Students and Hispanic Students Are Linked to Exclusionary Discipline

Zero tolerance policies likely contribute to high attrition rates of Black students and Hispanic students in Texas public schools. IDRA compared the trend lines for attrition rates to those of discipline data for the state of Texas. The historical high attrition rate for each race-ethnicity group parallels the period when zero tolerance policies gained momentum in Texas. Lower attrition rates for each group coincide with Texas’ legislative attempts to relax zero tolerance approaches under specific circumstances.

Resources:

- **Infographic:** 6 School Policies that Lead to Higher Dropout Rates
- **eBook:** Resources on Student Discipline Policy and Practice
- **Article:** In-Grade Retention in the Early Years - What’s Holding Children Back?
- **Article:** Interactive graphs and tables at our story site

(Fostering Excellence through Social Justice Principles, continued from Page 5)

One of the challenges for schools nationwide is the low performance of English learners. Mr. Rivers talked about how he is addressing this with his teachers: “I looked at the data and noticed that the ELs were in the lower levels of achieving success, and the gap was growing in the upper grade levels. I think as a district we have not been successful in helping students strengthen their native language and then transferring that to English. Perhaps, educators expect them to transfer to English when they’re not ready because there has not been a systematic way to transfer to English. I had to focus on that when I got here.

“I have had several conversations with teachers about their teaching so that instruction is at a very high cognitive level in the native language and they can then transfer that knowledge to English. We need to address systematic issues to provide excellent and equitable education for all students. We had experts evaluate our bilingual classrooms to see if they were teaching at the level of rigor in their native language so that they would have the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) needed to operate in both languages. We are moving to a dual language model to ensure that this occurs, and we’re beginning to see results. We are 13 percentage points away from closing the gap for ELs. I have a strong team of bilingual teachers, and we’re giving students and teachers more support so that they can do this transition well.”

Competency 6: Organizing Stakeholders for Collaborative Action

Visionary leaders achieve learning results through collaborative and strategic planning. This includes setting a shared vision that is articulated and embraced in the planning among campuses, parents and community leaders. The action planning results from effective communication, persistence and conflict resolution.

Mr. Rivers said: “Every time we meet as a professional learning community (PLC), we talk about our vision. When I got here, the vision statement was over 50 words, so we needed to shrink it and make it something we all can remember. The new statement is: As a Champion School of SAISD we, Ball Academy, will ensure collaboration to foster a positive culture of high expectations through quality instruction.

“I did a state-of-the-school address at the end of the first quarter and I asked teachers: How have you implemented the vision statement? and then they shared what they had done. It’s critical to

have a clear vision. Why do we open our doors in the morning? What is our vision? What is our mission? School is very simple to me; it is about educating and having a laser-like focus on instruction, student achievement and student outcomes. So my key role becomes getting the results we need by ensuring high quality rigor and high quality instruction in the classrooms as well as providing the support that teachers need.”

Competency 7: Measuring, Reporting and Sustaining Success

A superb school leader transforms a school through skillful use of data to lead and inspire teachers to continuous improvement. Teachers reflect on their practices and focus high-quality and corrective instruction addressing individual needs. The academic successes come from collective leadership and efficacy. Measuring, reporting and sustaining success to continuously improve requires effective use of data.

Mr. Rivers explained how he works with teachers to use data: “Professional learning communities are a major rock of our campus improvement plan. During our 90-minute PLCs, we really dive deep into the data. We have a system in place to look at lesson plans and assessments with a focus on what students need. We have spent a lot of time this past nine weeks training teachers to look at the data. Data can be very daunting, so you have to shrink it down to small chunks. We focus on item analysis. We’re not just giving them numbers like ‘45 percent of your students are doing this.’ That’s too broad. We dig deep to find out the root causes of something and how can adjust instruction and monitor improvement. We call this ‘deep data digs.’ Teachers are now comfortable with this process and are working diligently to analyze data to guide instruction.”

Research links effective school leaders to improved student achievement. The school principal is vital to sustainable, innovative and transformational school reform. Principals build capacity by developing teachers’ knowledge and skills, their community of practice, engendering program unity and providing resources.

Mr. Rivers spoke about how IDRA’s partnership with him through the STAARS Leaders project accelerated change at his school: “As a principal it was very valuable because you sometimes need someone to talk to and coach you, especially when you are having some difficult issues. Having the one-on-one trusting relationship helped me to energize and refocus on my campus and see maybe something that I wasn’t doing well.

Talking with someone to share ideas to come up with solutions through reflective thinking questions guided me to take the necessary steps that led to action. It is very positive when it is done by someone other than supervisors. This was very valuable.

“As far as working with teachers and students, we did a couple of core content STAAR camps – we called them “Comic-Cons” – with strategies that helped our eighth grade students move on to the next grade level. IDRA brought in a professional expert in the content areas who provided professional development and coached the teachers to address the skills students needed. The ideas that came out of the coaching sessions made a huge difference in how our school is working.

“One thing I’ve learned is that we do need a sounding board and to get feedback from a successful principal, because the university does not fully prepare you for all the challenges we have to face. As you know, in schools it all falls in the principal. When things go bad, it’s you. That’s the way it should be. You are the leader of the instructional campus. So having someone coach you through some processes that you may have some issues with is very valuable.

“Also in our work together this year I’ve seen a growth in our parent engagement skillset. We needed to deepen our commitment to work with parents. The experience I have had through IDRA’s STAARS Leaders project has been very beneficial and I have valued it.”

As Mr. Rivers has demonstrated, transformational principals lead with social justice principles in mind to cultivate a democratic and diverse space where all students are respected and flourish. These innovative leaders establish structures and a positive school culture that inspire teachers to collaborate in ways that build on their own leadership skills, using their voice, and engaging in schoolwide decisions that bring about the success of all students.

Nilka Avilés, Ed.D., is an IDRA senior education associate and IDRA STAARS Leaders project director. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at nilka.aviles@idra.org.



See references for this article at <http://budurl.com/IDRAndr6a>



Listen to the podcast episode: **A Principal on Leadership for a Turnaround School – Part 1** <http://budurl.com/IDRApodr6a>

IDRA EAC-South

Intercultural Development Research Association

The Intercultural Development Research Association is the only organization in the country to have continuously operated an equity assistance center since the program was created over four decades ago to protect students' civil rights in schools. Our expert staff and consultants have effectively assisted several hundred school districts across the South to help desegregate the schools and programs and engender a more equitable learning environment for all students.

The IDRA EAC-South provides technical assistance and training to build capacity of local educators. Samples of our work include...

- Reducing disproportionate school discipline for school districts cited by the Office for Civil Rights;
- Addressing English learner needs, including train-the-trainer models on professional development;
- Helping schools address bullying and harassment and building safer, healthier climates;
- Assisting districts under school desegregation orders in creating unitary school systems;
- Increasing minority student representation in higher-level courses;
- Designing low socioeconomic student integration plans with communities;
- Helping schools reduce religious discrimination;
- Expanding access to integrated school learning environments;
- Creating access to more rigorous courses and gifted programs for all students;
- Increasing parent involvement and engagement for underserved families; and
- Improving the capacity and distribution of teaching quality across schools.

Because this important work is subsidized by the federal government, these services come at no-cost to school districts or low, reasonable cost-sharing agreements.

With roots in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the federally-funded equity assistance centers help school districts build capacity to confront educational problems occasioned by race, national origin, sex and gender, and religion. The IDRA EAC-South is one of four regional centers. Our Region II center covers Washington, D.C., and 11 states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

IDRA is partnering with the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium and the Southern Education Foundation to develop local capacity in the region among the 2,341 school districts and 29,632 schools with over 1 million educators and 16 million students.

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“ The cool thing about presenting here is that we are all parents, and we want the best for our children, so there is a deep understanding and there is no fear. ”

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