RESEARCH BRIEF 12

Landscape of High School Credit Recovery in U.S. Public Schools: Perspectives From District Leaders

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About This Research Brief

This research brief is the 12th in a series of briefs for the *Online Credit Recovery Study* conducted by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®).[1] Many briefs in the series focus on the results of a rigorous research study that we conducted to examine the effectiveness of an online credit recovery model. The study focused on first-year high school students who failed Algebra 1 or English 9 (their ninth-grade English course) and retook the course during the summer before their second year of high school.

Key Findings

- Almost all districts use online instruction for credit recovery, with most districts offering some kind of in-person support for students.
- Districts take two distinct approaches to determining credit recovery course content, with some districts personalizing content for each student and others specifying the core content for credit recovery courses.
- Some districts described recent efforts to revise credit recovery programs to ensure equitable access and expectations for students.
- District leaders described engaging in an ongoing process to revise their credit recovery options, with a focus on creating conditions for student success while prioritizing academic rigor.
- The most common obstacles to implementing credit recovery programs that district leaders reported were scheduling, staffing, and funding.
- To avoid the need for credit recovery, several districts described efforts to promote student success during their first course, including opportunities for remediation and using formative assessment to differentiate instruction.

This brief contributes to our broader understanding of credit recovery by examining how public school districts across the United States are providing credit recovery opportunities for their high school students. Currently, information about the national landscape of credit recovery comes from two survey studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Education during the 2009–10 and 2014–15 school years.[2,3] Results across the two surveys show that the use of online learning for credit recovery during this period increased. The 2009–10 survey focused on remote learning,[4] which includes online learning, and reported that 34% of districts offered credit recovery courses through distance learning. The 2014–15 survey provides the most recent information about credit recovery opportunities across the country. This survey found that 89% of high schools[5] in the United States offered at least one credit recovery course to students. Of these high schools, 71% offer credit recovery using online courses, 46% use a blended model that combines online learning with an in-person facilitator, and 42% offer in-person instruction within a traditional classroom. Although both surveys provided useful information, the credit recovery landscape has likely shifted since then, especially as schools grapple with fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and teacher shortages, and the use of educational technology products continues to expand.[6]

What We Examined

To provide both current and more detailed information about high school credit recovery options, this research brief reports the results of a survey and follow-up interviews that we conducted with U.S. public school district leaders. Our primary goal was to gather information about the instructional models that districts use to provide credit recovery for high school students, along with the factors that districts consider when designing, implementing, and revising their credit recovery programs. We also asked districts about the challenges they encounter. During the interviews, district leaders also shared information about the approaches they are taking to support students' success in their initial course attempts to avoid the need for credit recovery.

We collected data for the study in two phases during spring 2023. For the first phase, we developed a brief survey for district leaders that asked about the credit recovery programs available to their students during summer 2022 and the 2022–23 school year. The survey included checklists listing various instructional formats for credit recovery and additional questions about how the district implements credit recovery courses. Forty-five district leaders completed the survey. For the second phase of data collection, we interviewed 10 district leaders who completed the survey, asking them to provide more detail about their credit recovery programs and the factors they consider when designing and implementing such programs. For more information on data collection, see Box 1.

BOX 1. DATA COLLECTION

Survey design. Based on our prior work in online learning and credit recovery, we designed the survey recognizing that credit recovery options vary widely while also wanting to keep the survey as brief as possible. One aspect of credit recovery we were most interested in capturing was the extent to which districts use online instruction and how they implement it for credit recovery courses.

To efficiently capture the variety of credit recovery models, the survey first asked district leaders to indicate whether they offer teacher-directed or online instruction classes, followed by a series of questions about how the district implements each type of course. We defined teacher-directed classes and online instruction classes as follows:

- **Teacher-directed classes** are those in which most or all content and instruction are provided by an in-person teacher with the appropriate subject-specific credential or certification.
- **Online instruction classes** are those in which most or all content and instruction are provided through an online platform or program.

For districts that offered online instruction classes, we then asked the survey respondents to indicate how they implement these classes, with options including the following:

- Students meet in a classroom where they are supervised and supported by a teacher certified in the course subject.
- Students meet in a classroom or computer lab and are supervised by a school staff member.
- Students work independently without in-person support from a school staff member.

Other questions included (a) whether the online content for their credit recovery courses had been developed by an online learning company (e.g., ALEKS, Edgenuity, K-12.com), a state or regional virtual program or school, or other entities and (b) what types of support the district provides students enrolled in credit recovery courses.

We also asked respondents whether they strongly agreed that their districts could effectively provide credit recovery to all students who need it and, if not, what factors limited their ability to do so.

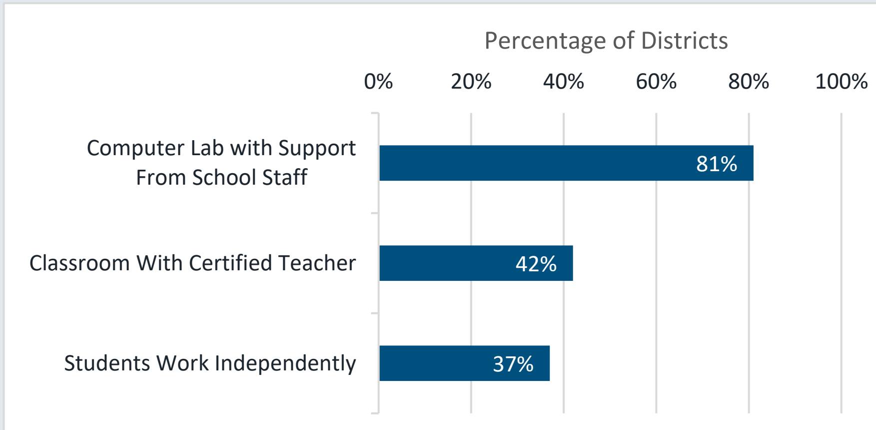
Survey sampling. Our goal for the survey was to collect information from a wide variety of districts across the United States. Using the Common Core of Data available from the National Center from Education Statistics (NCES) for the 2020–21 school year, we began by identifying all U.S. public school districts classified as "regular" local districts or local districts that are part of a supervisory union and restricted the sample to districts that enrolled at least 100 students in Grades 9–12. We then classified districts based on their geographic region (Northeast, South, Midwest, and West) and whether the districts' NCES locale classification was urban, suburban, or town/rural. These classifications produced 12 strata (four geographic regions $\times$ three locale classifications) from which we randomly sampled 25 districts per strata, yielding a sample size of 300 districts.[7] We then conducted a Web search to identify two leaders from each district who would be familiar with their district's credit recovery program. These individuals included such roles as the superintendent (especially in rural or town districts), the director or assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, the director of secondary schools, and counseling supervisors. We distributed the survey via email to all 300 districts, offering a $25 gift card to individuals who completed the survey. We received responses from 45 districts.[8] We compared the surveyed and responding districts on a set of district characteristics including geographic location, locale, graduation rate, enrollment, and student race/ethnicity composition. A larger percentage of responding districts had lower graduation rates, but this difference was not statistically significant. Exhibit A1 in the appendix presents descriptive statistics for the 300 sampled districts and the 45 responding districts.

Interviews. At the end of the survey, we asked respondents if they would consider participating in a follow-up interview that would go into more detail about credit recovery in their district. Fourteen respondents indicated an interest, and 10 district leaders completed the interview. The districts that participated in the interview were relatively evenly distributed across the four geographic regions. In terms of their NCES locale classifications, two districts were urban, four were suburban, and four were rural or town. The primary focus of the interview was for participants to describe in detail the two credit recovery options used by most students in their district. The semistructured interview format allowed for the possibility that additional themes could emerge, and we coded for these.

Almost All Districts Offer Online Instruction for Credit Recovery

Results from the survey indicate that almost all districts (93%) provide credit recovery options that employ online instruction. However, how districts implement online instruction varies (Exhibit 1). Most districts offer online instruction with some type of in-person support from a teacher or a staff member. Of the districts that offer online credit recovery courses, 81% offer online credit instruction recovery classes in a computer lab with support available from a teacher or other school staff member, and 42% offer online instruction in a classroom setting with a teacher certified in the academic subject. Students working online independently (with no in-person support) was an option available in 37% of districts. When asked who developed the online programs used for credit recovery, 86% of districts reported using programs developed by an online learning company, and 14% use an online program developed by a state or regional virtual school.

Exhibit 1. District Approaches to Implementing Online Instruction for Credit Recovery



Note. The graph presents the percentages of districts that implement the three models of online credit recovery for the 93% of districts that offer online credit recovery courses. Because districts could select more than one option, percentages do not sum to 100%.

Although no responding district reported offering only teacher-directed credit recovery classes, 62% of districts offer teacher-directed in addition to online credit recovery options. Thirty-eight percent of districts offer credit recovery as an independent study with students completing a personalized course of study in which a teacher determined the course content and requirements.

District Credit Recovery Approaches Prioritize Either Personalization or Standardization

As district leaders described their two most common credit recovery options for students during the interviews, themes emerged about the factors they consider when designing and implementing credit recovery programs. One theme was that districts take two distinct approaches to determining the content covered in these courses. Some districts personalize course content for each student by identifying specific assignments, tests, or sections of a course that a student must complete. This format is most common with teacher-directed instructional models, in which a teacher develops a plan for what material students need to either redo or complete, although one district does this by using an online platform that allows teachers to specify which units a student must complete. For districts that use standards-based grading, a teacher reviews a student's performance on each standard in a gradebook or learning management system to identify which standards a student has not yet demonstrated proficiency and needs to work on.

> The teacher gets on [the online learning platform] and says, "All right, here are the areas that you did not do well in and you're going to redo these. I'm going to be here to help you if I can."

In contrast, other districts create a standard credit recovery curriculum for all students. In these districts, a group of educators or administrators identified the course content or course standards they believe are necessary for students to demonstrate proficiency in the course and be successful in subsequent courses.

> When it comes to determining the content of a course, it's a bit of a team approach because we start from the position that we are very intent that a credit recovery credit has to be an equitable credit. And from there we move to identify the priority standards or the power standards for each course.

Districts Recognize the Need for Students to Have Equitable Access to Credit Recovery

A second theme regarding the factors that district leaders consider when developing credit recovery programs was the importance of ensuring that students throughout the district have equitable access to credit recovery options. Some districts were moving from unstandardized practices that could vary both within and between schools so that all students encounter the same expectations and requirements to recover course credit. In other districts, increasing equity took the form of removing obstacles that prevented some students from accessing credit recovery courses. For example, removing required fees for credit recovery courses or, in rural districts, creating in-district alternatives instead of having students travel significant distances to regional programs.

> Part of our problem has been that the offerings vary from school to school and program to program, which, in my opinion, is an equity issue.

Districts Engage in Ongoing Efforts to Improve Credit Recovery

During the interviews, we asked district leaders if they had or were planning to modify their credit recovery programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all district leaders indicated that any changes they made did not relate to the pandemic. Instead, they described ongoing efforts to improve credit recovery that started before spring 2020, with many of these efforts focusing on creating conditions that support students' success in credit recovery courses and ensuring the academic rigor of their credit recovery programs.

Creating Conditions For Student Success

District leaders described ongoing efforts to modify their credit recovery programs to support students' success. Some changes referred to slight modifications—such as offering shorter class periods across more days to better accommodate student schedules—whereas others referred to creating more options for credit recovery either during the school year or in the summer. For example, one district recently shifted to offering credit recovery courses within the district rather than sending students to a neighboring community, which required students to find their own transportation. Other districts recognized that offering transportation was critical for providing students with access to credit recovery courses offered in the summer.

> So we started by having students come in two to three days a week to work on their course and take their tests. We have a proctor overseeing the testing, but this also just gives the students devoted time to work. The next step was, "Hey, how do we get students here? They're not coming." What did that look like? Working with transportation and figuring out how to fund transportation during the summer. So, it's kind of pairing together all these things that kids need to be supported and successful.

Prioritizing Academic Rigor

District leaders also discussed how they were careful to ensure that credit recovery classes included enough content and instructional activities for a student's credit recovery course grade to represent authentic engagement and effort, as well as the importance of making sure that students were prepared for future success in related courses. Along these lines, district leaders explained that they wanted to be sure that students would not perceive that passing a credit recovery course would be easier than passing their initial course attempt. "We are shooting ourselves in the foot if kids learn that they can not go to school during the day or do well and then just go for a few hours at night."

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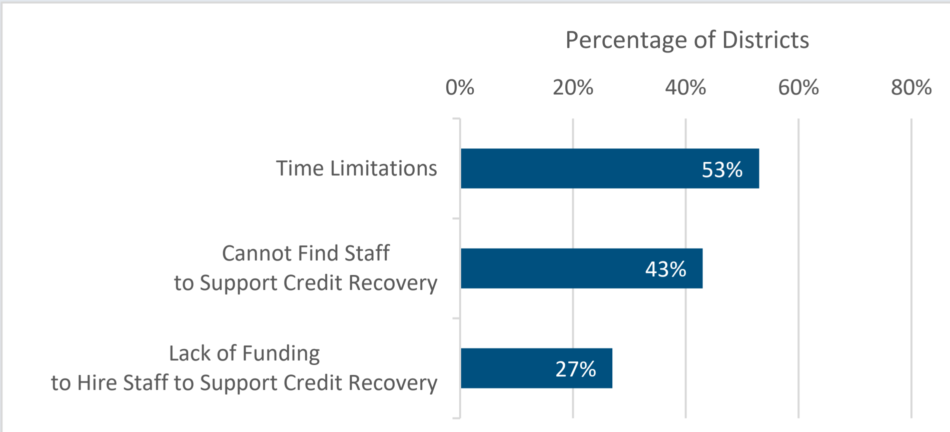
Although districts did not specifically revise their credit recovery programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, two districts noted an increase in the number of students needing to recover credit. They attributed this increase to students experiencing greater mental health challenges combined with an increase in the stressors experienced by themselves and their families.

> We've seen a lot more students where there are many more days where they're just not in a place where they can learn. It doesn't matter whether they want to learn or not; they're just not in a place where they can learn. And so that has increased the numbers of students who aren't passing. As a result, we have more students that need more time to be able to get things done, and credit recovery has become the primary option for how they're able to complete things.

Time and Resource Constraints Hinder Providing Credit Recovery

When asked on the survey whether they thought their district could effectively provide credit recovery to all students who needed it, only 33% of districts strongly agreed with the statement. We asked the remaining districts what factors limit their ability to provide credit recovery. The two most common responses were time limitations, such as not enough time in students' schedules (53%), and not finding staff for credit recovery classes (43%). Lack of funding to hire staff was a factor in 27% of districts (Exhibit 2). Neither space limitations nor lack of access to high-quality curricula or content for credit recovery appeared as significant limitations for districts, with only 10% citing these two factors.

Exhibit 2. District Constraints to Providing Credit Recovery



Note. The graph presents the percentage of districts that reported each constraint for the 67% of school districts that did not strongly agree with being able to effectively provide credit recovery to all students who need it. Because districts could select more than one option, percentages do not sum to 100%.

The interviews confirmed the three most common challenges reported in the survey—time, staffing, and funding—and provided some additional context. For one district, the challenge regarding time was trying to schedule credit recovery during the school year in ways that would allow students to both access the courses they need to graduate as well as electives and other activities that often keep them engaged with schooling.

> Creating a master schedule is always tough. We really want to have credit recovery classes throughout the day to make it convenient for students to take the courses they need, as well as credit recovery, but that's easier said than done. It's always a challenge.

Some districts that offer credit recovery outside the regular school day, such as in the summer, talked about the difficulty finding staff. They noted that it was becoming more difficult to find teachers willing to cover summer school courses, attributing this to the stress teachers experienced related to the COVID-19 pandemic and concluding that many

> One thing that is impacted by the pandemic is that our teachers are exhausted. It's really hard. We increased summer school pay dramatically, and we do have a lot of people teaching summer school, but people just need a break . . . They are getting paid for this, but still sometimes sanity is more important than money.

teachers want the break that summer offers. In another instance, a district began to assign paraprofessionals to monitor students using online instruction, rather than teachers certified in the subject matter given the challenge of hiring teachers for credit recovery. The paraprofessionals supported student engagement and helped students connect with certified teachers for instructional support.

> Finding the right teacher is always tough. We need to have a teacher who understands [the online platform] and how it works but then also has the content knowledge for all the different courses. For example, a math teacher is going to have to know math for all the math courses. It's always tough finding the right people to be able to do that.

Regarding funding, some districts noted that funding often was a problem, but Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds awarded to districts as part of the American Rescue Plan were allowing them to either expand their credit recovery options or provide related services. For example, one district recently started using online instruction, which was something they could not afford previously. Other districts used the funds to provide meals and transportation to increase students' participation in credit recovery programs. In most cases, districts were not confident they would be able to continue the new programs or services once ESSER funds expired.

Districts Are Intervening to Support Student Success and Avoid the Need for Credit Recovery

Although we did not set out to learn what districts are doing to reduce the need for credit recovery, many district leaders shared this information during their interviews. Their approaches fell into three categories. One approach was for districts to build opportunities for academic remediation into the semester. They established procedures for teachers to monitor student performance during the semester, with an eye toward identifying students who were not on track to pass and providing them with opportunities to make up or complete work before the semester ended. One district did this by introducing a flex period into the school day that allowed teachers to work with students experiencing academic struggles. Once students were back on track to pass, they could spend these periods participating in school clubs or other nonacademic activities. "[B]ut our folks are really looking at data early on . . . even before the [end of the] first nine weeks [and implementing] interventions to try to get kids credit eligible by the end of the semester."

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Other districts offered an "extended semester" in which students could complete or repeat assignments in 1 or 2 weeks following a semester's end. If a student completed their work during this interval, they received an initial passing grade in the course and avoided the need for credit recovery.

> Our district is a standards-based district, and each course has its standards. A student may be missing one or two standards, so they are really close to earning credit in the class, but they have one or two things missing. They could have been absent on a test day, they could have had a bad day, or whatever. This student would be offered an extended semester. Usually, it's for two weeks. The teacher determines what work they need to see from the student to determine that the student is proficient.

One district was enthusiastic about its recent efforts to develop professional learning communities (PLCs) with their teachers that included a focus on supporting students before they begin to fall behind. One component of the PLC work was to implement the use of formative assessment to identify groups of students that would benefit from differentiated instruction. Although only one district mentioned this approach, the district leader perceived this as a promising and exciting development for the district.

> Credit recovery is like an autopsy; the student failed and it's too late to really do anything about their grade. Formative assessment and teachers collaborating around students gives us an opportunity to try to figure out who didn't learn before we give them a summative assessment. That not only requires formative assessment but also requires teachers to look at those formative assessments and then do some real differentiation of instruction.

Takeaways

The results from the survey and interviews suggest that districts are taking a wide range of approaches to providing students with options to recover course credit, as well as identifying approaches to support students' success during their initial experience in a course.

Although we set out to collect more current information about how U.S. public school districts are providing credit recovery options for students, it is important to note that the sample sizes for both the survey and the interviews were small. Even though the samples represent a diverse group of districts in terms of geographic location and types of communities, the responses may not represent the prevalence and range of credit recovery approaches throughout the country. Furthermore, we anticipate that the district leaders who agreed to participate in the interviews may represent districts that were enthusiastic to share with a researcher how they are supporting students who need to recover credit. Districts that find providing credit recovery challenging or that may not be prioritizing credit recovery were likely less motivated to talk about their programs (or lack of programs) in detail.

Even with the limitation of the small sample sizes, we believe the results provide valuable information about how districts are supporting students to stay on track for high school graduation.

- Almost all districts use online instruction for credit recovery but with a variety of online models. Distinguishing between "online" and "in-person" courses may no longer be the most useful way to define credit recovery course instructional models. It may be more important to consider the amount of instructional support available to students from teachers and other school staff, as well as the extent to which the course is standardized or tailored to individual student needs.

- Districts try to ensure that their credit recovery programs provide rigorous instructional content to students and offer enough options to facilitate students access. This process is counter to a common narrative that some districts may offer credit recovery options that make it easy for students to earn course credit as a way to inflate their graduation rates.[9]
- Districts reported challenges related to staffing, time, and funding when providing credit recovery opportunities to students. Although ESSER funds allowed some districts to adjust their credit recovery programs to better meet students' needs, some of these efforts may be at risk as the funds expire in 2024.
- Several district leaders described how their district tries to reduce the need for credit recovery by employing new ways of supporting students' initial success in their high school courses. Future research should seek to better understand the different approaches that districts take to support students' initial success.

Appendix

Exhibit A1. Comparison of the Characteristics of Sampled Districts and Districts That Responded to the Survey

District characteristics	Sampled districts *Mean* (*n* = 300)	Responding districts *Mean* (*n* = 45)	*p-value*
Geographic region			
Northeast	24%	29%	.55
South	24%	29%	.55
Midwest	25%	20%	.46
West	26%	22%	.56
NCES locale code			
Urban	33%	36%	.76
Suburban	33%	29%	.59
Town or rural	34%	36%	.83
Grades 9–12 student enrollment	3,273	2,812	.51
Districtwide graduation rate			
0%–49%	1%	5%	.33
50%–79%	13%	18%	.41
80%–89%	37%	39%	.88
>90%	48%	37%	.24
District student race/ethnicity composition			
American Indian/Alaska Native	1%	1%	.11
Asian	4%	3%	.03
Black	11%	14%	.30
Hispanic	21%	20%	.80
Pacific Islander	0%	0%	.94
White	58%	57%	.93
Two or more races	5%	5%	.91

Note. The sampled district column represents the 300 districts the study team contacted for the survey. The responding district column is for the 45 districts that completed the survey. The *p*-value is from a two-group *t*-test of the difference between the responding and nonresponding districts. Data sourced from the National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data.

NOTES

[1] This study is funded with research grant R305A170152 from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education. Please visit https://www.air.org/online-credit-recovery-study to access all the research briefs and for more information about the study. The authors would like to thank the district leaders who participated in the study, especially the 10 who participated in an interview.

[2] Queen, B., & Lewis, L. (2011). *Distance education courses for public elementary and secondary school students: 2009-10: First look* (NCES 2012-008). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED526879.pdf

[3] Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development. (2018). *Issue brief: Credit recovery*. U.S. Department of Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED591002.pdf

[4] Queen and Lewis (2011) defined distance education as follows:

> Distance education courses are courses offered to elementary and secondary school students regularly enrolled in your district that must meet all of the following criteria: be credit-granting; and be technology-delivered via audio, video (live or prerecorded), the Internet, or other computer-based technology (e.g., via district network); and have either (a) the instructor in a different location than the students and/or (b) the course content developed in, or delivered from, a different location than that of the students.

[5] Unlike the 2009-10 survey, which surveyed school districts, the 2014-15 survey surveyed high schools.

[6] Gross, B. (2021, February 8). Analysis: Schools are facing a surge of failing grades during the pandemic—and traditional approaches like credit recovery will not be enough to manage it. *The 74*. https://www.the74million.org/article/analysis-schools-are-facing-a-surge-of-failing-grades-during-the-pandemic-and-traditional-approaches-like-credit-recovery-will-not-be-enough-to-manage-it/

[7] Because our sampling strategy drew equally across geographic regions and locale codes, it is not nationally representative. To report results that reflect the national distribution of school districts, we report weighted averages when discussing overall results from the survey. The weights account for the sampling probability within each geographic region and locale strata. We report unweighted percentages when reporting on subgroups (e.g., when describing the group of districts that used online instruction or the group that did not strongly agree that they effectively offer credit recovery to all students who need it).

[8] We distributed the survey in two waves, beginning with one of the district leaders we identified in each district. If that district contact did not respond to the survey after three additional email outreach attempts in a 2-week period, we distributed the survey to the second district contact. We also sent up to three follow-up emails to second district contact.

[9] Gewertz, C. (2018, September 18). Does too much credit recovery lead to inflated graduation rates? *Education Week.* https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/does-too-much-credit-recovery-lead-to-inflated-graduation-rates/2018/09

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