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Laying the Foundation for Successful School Leadership

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Key Findings

- Making the correct match between a candidate and a vacancy and then supporting the new principal during the transition period can greatly affect the ability of a school to perform to its highest potential.
- A successful match depends both on the principal's capabilities and on how he or she is able to function within the school's context.
- Making certain that there are resources readily available to principals when they first start out at a school may make the difference between their staying or leaving soon after being hired.
- A high-quality evaluation system can play a key role in helping principals improve their own performance and in helping central office staff make informed decisions about principals' career paths.
- Over the course of the past decade, more districts have been providing increasing amounts of autonomy to principals.
- The "right" level of autonomy will vary by district and possibly by school or principal. Three key issues that districts should consider in making this decision are principal capacity, district efficiency, and principal expertise.

Many believe that a good principal is essential to a successful school. In fact, research has found that principals are second only to teachers as the most important school factor affecting student achievement. Through their role as school leaders, principals can influence student achievement in a number of ways—monitoring instruction; evaluating teachers; hiring, developing, and retaining school staff; maintaining student discipline; managing the school budget; establishing a school culture; and engaging with the community. While principals' skills in these areas are certainly important, skills alone are not enough to ensure that they will be effective school leaders. This is because school and district contexts—which include school and district characteristics, practices, and policies—set the stage for principals' performance and strongly influence their effectiveness.

In preparing this report, we reviewed existing research and literature conducted at RAND and elsewhere to provide guidance to district decisionmakers and others who manage school systems. We have included some of the most relevant research on the topic at the end as related reading.

Districts and states establish minimum eligibility requirements for individuals serving as principals in public schools. The intent of these requirements—which include mandated degrees, prior teaching and/or administrative experience, and certifications—is to ensure a minimum quality standard in the principal candidate pool. Yet even with these requirements in place, districts—especially those in urban settings—experience wide variations in school outcomes. Districts and states continue to struggle with a range of issues that lead to this variation in outcomes. For example, principal turnover can have a negative impact on student achievement, and schools serving high-needs students tend to experience higher rates of turnover. Research suggests that this turnover is driven by both district and principal decisions. Principals are

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influenced by a lack of decisionmaking authority at the school level and other unfavorable school and district conditions, and they are enticed by attractive career opportunities outside the principalship. Districts appear to remove principals when student achievement outcomes decline. Even among those principals who stay in their schools, outcomes vary. There are actions that states and districts can take to address these issues and improve the chances for positive student achievement outcomes.

In this paper, we focus on four areas that research has identified as particularly influential in supporting principal effectiveness: placement in the school, evaluation, autonomy, and resources. We highlight how actions in these areas can create conditions in the school and district that foster principal success. For simplicity, we use the term *school district* (or *district*) to refer to the decisionmaking agency, but the discussion applies more broadly to any local education agency, including charter management organizations.

SETTING UP NEW PRINCIPALS FOR SUCCESS

When principal vacancies occur, new principals are placed in schools with existing cultures, strengths, and weaknesses. Even with mandatory state-issued principal certifications, district-specific principal candidate requirements, and formal district processes for hiring and placing principals, there is no guarantee that the context of a school with a vacancy will be a good match for every available principal candidate. Making the correct match between a candidate and a vacancy and supporting the new principal during the transition period can greatly affect the ability of a school to perform to its highest potential. A successful match depends both on the principal's capabilities and on how he or she is able to function within the school's context. Although there is no "one size fits all" approach to principal placement, we can provide district and state policymakers with guidelines for making the best match possible and for enabling the principal to succeed once placed.

Consider School Context

School context almost always influences what a principal must do to drive the school toward success. As a result, a given candidate's strengths and weaknesses should be considered in light of that specific context. For example, a school with a high level of parental and community involvement may need a principal who is good at harnessing that involvement toward schoolwide goals. In contrast, a school that is lacking in parental involvement may need a principal with strong community outreach skills. To the extent there is not a "perfect match" between available candidates and a school's needs, professional development opportunities should focus on those areas that are vital to the school and where the principal may lack needed skills. For example, a principal with no experience in bilingual education moving into a school with a special focus on this type of curriculum might benefit from a professional development opportunity focused on this area. District decisionmakers commonly think about matching a new principal with a school only after a vacancy occurs; however, a system that tracks school context on an ongoing basis might facilitate identifying high-quality matches once the time comes to look for a new principal.

Cultivate the Principal Candidate Pool

Success in placing the right principal in the right school requires a pool of highly qualified candidates. As discussed above, professional development opportunities can compensate for some needs, but those investments will not turn every candidate into a good match for every school. If the pool of available candidates is not of sufficient quality, the district will suffer. Therefore, a district should proactively fill the candidate pool with adequately trained principals. These efforts may

include, but are not limited to, working with a university or other organization to develop an aspiring principal program, reaching out beyond the district to attract principals from other parts of the country, and targeting teachers or other educators within the district who have demonstrated strong leadership skills for principal training.

Assess the Hiring Process

High principal turnover and/or poor school outcomes may suggest that the right principals are not being placed at a school. In evaluating the hiring process, a district should determine whether the key stakeholders in charge of hiring the principal are provided with enough information to make informed decisions based on the strengths and weaknesses of both the school and the principal candidates. Another consideration is to include additional stakeholders in the decisionmaking process; for example, some school districts include parents, local community members, and students at the school on the committee that selects the principal. A district may also wish to consider additional methods of screening candidates, such as experiential interviewing (e.g., having the candidate perform a teacher evaluation) to better judge a candidate's strengths and weaknesses. A district should especially reevaluate the hiring processes for schools having trouble with keeping principals or for schools that are chronically underperforming. A reworking of the hiring process for these schools may help prevent repeating negative outcomes with a new principal.

Help Orient Principals Quickly to Combat Early Career Turnover

Once the best candidate has been placed into a principal position at a school, the district should provide support to ensure that this new principal will be successful and remain in the job. This includes making certain that there are resources readily available to principals when they first start out at a school, which may make the difference between their staying or leaving soon after being hired. Some districts, for example, provide additional supports to principals in the first year of placement; a network of other principals as well as contact with a coach or more experienced "mentor" principal may help to support principals early in their career. Other orientation approaches include creating a customized "onboarding plan" for each new principal, identifying key contacts and resources, clearly setting first-year expectations, and designating check-in points to gauge progress so that principals early in their tenure know whether they are on track to raise student achievement at their school.

BUILDING EVALUATION SYSTEMS THAT FOSTER STRONGER PRINCIPALS

A high-quality evaluation system can play a key role in helping principals improve their own performance and in helping central office staff make informed decisions about principals' career paths. Many states and districts have dramatically revised their evaluation systems in recent years, in large part in response to federal initiatives such as Race to the Top,[1] which have incentivized states and districts to adopt performance-based evaluation systems for teachers and principals. Although we don't have enough empirical evidence to recommend a single specific approach to principal evaluation or a particular set of measures, findings from research on the implementation of educator evaluation systems allow us to provide policymakers with guidelines for designing and implementing effective systems. Below, we highlight factors to consider when developing principal evaluation systems and recommend ways to promote effective implementation.

Identify the Purposes of the Evaluation System

An evaluation *system* consists of two key components—a set of evaluation measures and an approach to using the measures in ways that will support decisionmaking and promote principals' growth. The first step in designing an effective system is for the developers to identify the purposes of the system. Common purposes of principal evaluation systems include:

- Clarifying expectations for practices in which principals should engage
- Providing formative feedback to help principals improve their practice
- Promoting state or district goals (particularly around improvement of teaching)
- Supporting decisions about hiring, placement, dismissal, and compensation.

The purposes should help determine which measures are selected and how (or whether) scores on those measures are combined to create an overall evaluation score. For example, a system that is intended only to provide formative feedback does not need to demonstrate the same level of validity and reliability that would be expected from a system that involves high-stakes decisions about principal compensation or dismissal.

Select Multiple Measures of Performance

After determining the purposes, the next step is to select measures. The guiding principles for measuring principal effectiveness should be multiple measures, alignment with standards, and technical quality. There is a growing consensus among policymakers that principal evaluation systems should incorporate multiple measures and take into account student achievement as well as principal practice (e.g., observation rubrics). There is also a trend toward incorporating measures that gather input from a variety of stakeholder groups, such as teachers, principal supervisors, and parents. Using multiple measures and collecting input from varied stakeholders reduces the risk that a principal will receive an inaccurate score because of measurement error or divergent performance in a single dimension, and it also provides a variety of evidence that can be helpful for informing principals' professional development.

The selected measures should also align with state and district central office goals and with professional standards. For instance, if a district is focused on improving instructional quality, the principal evaluation tool should be designed to encourage and reward principals' attention to instructional leadership activities.

Finally, those developing the system must consider the technical quality—the validity, reliability, and fairness—of the individual measures as well as any combined measure before launching the system, and must reexamine the quality on an ongoing basis. They should pay attention to the score distributions on the various measures and look for evidence that the system is fair to principals working in different types of schools. In particular, it is essential to ensure that principals working in challenging school contexts are not unduly disadvantaged by the system. The evaluation system should also differentiate performance at all points along the distribution rather than simply identifying the poorest performers.

Provide Feedback and Support Based on Evaluations

High-quality evaluation measures are essential to an effective principal evaluation system, but they are not the only requirement. Research suggests several important conditions that should be in place. Perhaps most importantly, principals should receive *actionable feedback* based on the evaluation, as well as access to ongoing training and support based on the evaluation. This feedback should be provided throughout the year to guide performance, rather than only after the annual evaluation—particularly for early-career principals. Moreover, principals should be given the time, tools, and resources needed to accomplish the objectives that are encouraged by the evaluation system. In particular, if the system emphasizes principals' role as instructional leaders, they need to have adequate opportunities to observe and provide feedback to teachers and a way to delegate other tasks if necessary to allow time for instructional leadership practices.

Take Continuous Steps to Ensure That the System Works

Beyond designing and implementing the evaluation system effectively, a district must take additional steps to ensure the quality of the results. First, those responsible for conducting principal evaluations should participate in professional development training that helps them do the task effectively. In particular, the training should establish and reinforce standards to promote high levels of consistency among those who rate principals' practices. Second, the technical quality of all of the evaluation measures should be examined at regular intervals once the system has been implemented, and the effects of the system on principals and other school and district staff should be monitored regularly so that midcourse corrections can be made if necessary.

GIVING PRINCIPALS THE AUTONOMY TO LEAD SCHOOLS

A principal's *autonomy* is his or her ability to make decisions that influence conditions at the school. In order to be able to influence student and school outcomes, principals need the knowledge, skills, and abilities as well as the autonomy

to make decisions that influence critical school conditions. Increased autonomy may allow principals to lead their schools more effectively, thus potentially improving student outcomes. Without at least some level of autonomy, principals may be hampered in their ability to lead their schools. For example, a lack of autonomy over managing school staff may result in the principal having to retain ineffective teachers, even though the principal may be held responsible for the overall student performance that those teachers influence. On the other hand, there may be arguments for limiting autonomy, such as reducing the number of decisions a principal needs to make in order to allow a focus on essential decisions.

The key areas of autonomy in K–12 education are human capital management, curriculum and instruction, and school operations and management. Human capital management autonomy refers to decisions about managing school staff, including hiring, evaluating, removing, and disciplining teachers and other school staff. Curriculum and instruction autonomy refers to autonomy over both the content of the curriculum and how it is supported and implemented in the school. Autonomy over school operations and management refers to the ability to make budget decisions and establish disciplinary policy, performance goals, and the school's vision.

Consider Options for Autonomy Levels

Until recently, limited autonomy was the status quo in many school districts in the United States. Under limited autonomy, the district would typically maintain control over most aspects of human capital management and the operations and management of schools. In most cases, the principal would be able to exercise some decisionmaking authority within the parameters established by the district—for example, in applying student discipline policies, allocating resources within budget line-items, or making the final selection from the district's list of potential candidates for a position at the school.

Over the course of the past decade, more districts have been providing increasing amounts of autonomy to principals, and districts should consider different options for autonomy levels. Some districts place explicit limits on principal autonomy, but the extent and nature of those limits can vary across schools within the district. Autonomy levels can also differ across schools depending on the grade level and size of the school, as well as the experience and performance record of the principal. Following are three examples of these types of efforts:

Over the course of the past decade, more districts have been providing increasing amounts of autonomy to principals, and districts should consider different options for autonomy levels.

- A medium-sized urban district provides limited autonomy for certain principals. The district increases autonomy in human capital management for experienced principals with a track record of student achievement growth and who are willing to transfer to chronically low-performing schools.
- A district in a large urban setting gives its principals a high level of autonomy over managing instruction and school operations, including allowing principals to manage the budget, select curriculum, and choose a support network. They also have some decisionmaking authority over human capital. Principals are on a performance contract and have to meet certain goals in order to keep their contract. Additionally, they are not given school-based tenure.
- Charter management organizations (CMOs) set policies on the autonomy given to principals, similar to the function a district would play, but usually provide more flexibility in all areas of autonomy. For example, CMOs are less likely to mandate curriculum across schools and more likely to provide autonomy over human capital management than traditional public schools. Principals in charter schools often have the ability to build school culture and to change schedules, classroom structure, and disciplinary policy.

Autonomy may be limited for a number of reasons, some of which may be determined at higher levels of the system. For example, many districts do not provide extensive human capital management autonomy because the hiring and removal process for school staff may be set by state or district policies or union bargaining agreements. Autonomy may also be limited due to state policies governing teacher or other staff evaluation requirements or the adoption of statewide curriculum standards (such as the Common Core State Standards), which would constrain curriculum choices. Districts should identify any existing restrictions to autonomy when setting policy in this area and consider removing any restrictions that are no longer productive.

Establish the Level of Autonomy Strategically

In providing more or less autonomy to principals, districts must strike a balance between principal and district leadership. There is no one-size-fits-all solution—no ideal level of autonomy that all districts should provide. The "right" level of autonomy will vary by district and possibly by school or principal. Three key issues that districts should consider in making this decision are principal capacity, district efficiency, and principal expertise.

Principal capacity: Schools benefit from increased principal autonomy when principals have the knowledge and skills to make effective decisions. There are a number of things a district can do to improve principal capacity to make good decisions. When providing increased autonomy to principals, the district could improve the professional development and other supports available to ensure that principals have the tools necessary to make informed decisions. This could include targeted professional development to lower-performing principals in the areas where autonomy is to be provided. Another strategy is to increase autonomy for only those principals with a record of success. Lastly, a district may choose to pilot any changes in autonomy with a small group of schools to test how these changes work prior to applying the changed autonomy policy to all schools in the district.

District efficiency: In certain areas, it may be more efficient for the district to set a single policy for all schools rather than providing autonomy to principals in a particular area. For example, it is less costly for the district to have one curriculum, one teacher evaluation system, and one bus system rather than having different systems for each school. Having a shared curriculum and goals as a district provides consistency and ensures a smoother transition for students and staff who transfer between schools. A common data system has the added benefit of allowing the district to analyze data across schools and make comparisons. Districtwide systems reduce the number of decisions a principal needs to make, freeing up time to focus on essential decisions. However, in areas where districts set a single policy for all schools, it is critical that principals have real and meaningful opportunities to provide input into the development of those policies.

Principal expertise: Districts should consider awarding increased autonomy in areas where principal expertise could make a difference; i.e., areas in which a principal has the best information compared with other actors and an incentive to make the right decision. This should be considered in tandem with an evaluation of principal capacity and efficiency. Aligning autonomy to areas of principal expertise that are at the school level and do not interfere with district management or coherence for students or staff would strike a balance between principal autonomy and district management.

PROVIDING PRINCIPALS WITH THE RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS THEY NEED

With the average principal's workweek clocking in around 58 hours,[2] few would argue that principals have extra time on their hands. As states and districts place greater emphasis on teacher quality and teacher evaluation, they add to the already significant responsibilities that principals must fulfill. States and districts can enable principals to take on these additional responsibilities by providing them with the resources and supports needed to carry out their multiple roles effectively.

In designing such resources and supports, states and districts need to balance the desire for principal autonomy with the efficient management of district resources, as discussed earlier. Some types of resources and supports restrict a principal's flexibility; however, such limits may be needed in order to make the best use of a principal's time and effort. For example, a districtwide teacher evaluation system will shape the type of feedback the principal provides to teachers, but few would argue that every principal at every school should spend time designing a unique teacher evaluation system. Ideally, resources and supports for principals should reflect districtwide management and accountability efforts but also be

responsive to the needs and capabilities of individual schools and principals. To effectively achieve this balance between autonomy and effective resource use, districts should ensure that the district leadership team includes a principal representative who can provide input on the implications of district-level decisions for autonomy. In addition, the district should monitor the effectiveness of the supports that are provided to principals.

Two important areas in which principals need resources and supports are delegation and data-driven decisionmaking. For both of these areas, principals need professional development targeted specifically to them and to the needs of their schools.

Enable Principals to Delegate Responsibilities

Principals' responsibilities have expanded substantially in recent years. Notably, the recent spotlight on teacher quality has increased the amount of time principals must spend on teacher evaluation and support, requiring that principals either reduce their time spent on other areas or delegate some of the added teacher evaluation and support activities to others. Support for principals in this area may require important changes.

First, principals must have the authority to delegate responsibilities and determine to whom they will delegate them. Where state policy or staff contracts impede such delegation, those barriers should be reviewed and addressed. For example, if a teacher contract states that certain responsibilities can be delegated only to individuals who fill explicit teacher leader positions, the principal should be able to fill the position with an appropriately skilled candidate and not be required simply to fill the position with the teacher who has most seniority—or the policy should be reconsidered to allow the principal to delegate effectively. State or district policymakers should also revisit restrictions on delegating responsibilities related to teacher evaluation to staff other than the principal or assistant principal.

Second, successful delegation of teacher evaluation tasks also requires that districts provide support for individuals, such as teacher leaders, who may have limited experience to assume these evaluation responsibilities. Even in schools with highly capable teacher leaders, districts will need to devote resources to professional development to ensure that staff are trained sufficiently to ensure high-quality evaluations. In schools with less teacher leadership capacity, districts may need to consider providing new teacher leaders with targeted support or transferring staff from other schools to meet the need for staff with more teacher evaluation experience. Districts could consider allocating additional staff to the school (for example, budgeting for increased assistant principal time), providing more coaching to the principal, or forming and mobilizing district support teams.

Finally, in cases where delegating teacher evaluation and support activities is not feasible, districts must work to reduce the administrative burden at the school level, perhaps by centralizing selected management decisions or by providing principals with additional staffing to assist with management of day-to-day issues.

Support Data-Driven Decisionmaking

Data-driven decisionmaking is a cornerstone of school improvement. To make effective, informed decisions, principals must have access to timely data relevant to issues over which the school has some control. They need the capacity to process and make sense of the information so they can make decisions on the basis of what they have learned. Perhaps most importantly, data-driven decisionmaking requires an evidence-based culture in the school. Teachers and principals must be acculturated to examine the evidence on whether a particular practice or intervention is associated with improved outcomes and not rely solely on their beliefs or anecdotal evidence.

Districts can support principals by investing in the development of such an evidence-based culture. This means providing resources for training, coaching, and common planning time for teachers and principals to work together to analyze data to improve teaching practice. Districts can also support data-driven decisionmaking by establishing standards for data collection along with the tools or systems for collecting these data. They can establish cross-site learning communities to facilitate the dissemination of best practices. And they can help principals by providing tools, systems, and coaching for effectively analyzing data.

Even when the principal is directly involved in the collection of the data, the state or district should provide a support system that drives what is collected and can facilitate effective use at the school level. The less time principals spend developing tools to collect data, the more time they can spend reflecting on what the data show and using that information to make improvements.

Collect Essential School-Level Data

The following data are useful to nearly all schools:

- Student-level data: end-of-year state tests, midyear district assessments, and periodic grade-level assessments, as well as information on attendance, disciplinary referrals, suspensions
- Teacher data: teacher evaluation scores, teacher value-added metrics, teacher attendance, and teacher professional development history
- Stakeholder data: information from surveys of parents, students, and community members.

Provide Targeted Professional Development

For both delegation and data-driven decisionmaking, principals need professional development that is targeted to both the needs of the school and the capabilities of the principal. Such tailored trainings will be far more effective than generic professional development opportunities. For example, the task of delegating responsibility will differ across schools depending on the current level of capacity in the school and the principal's individual capabilities; therefore, each principal should be trained to function within her school's particular context. Districts should use the data from principal evaluations in combination with the data on school context to shape plans for principal professional development. Relevant school context information might include student demographic characteristics, grade levels served by the school, and whether the school has been identified as in need of improvement under the state or district accountability system, as well as information on school climate from observations or surveys.

LAYING A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

The four factors we discussed—placement, evaluation, autonomy, and supports—all contribute strongly to the foundation for a school principal's success. We summarize the actions that research has identified as being particularly important in the following pages. As the role of the school principal continues to grow, these actions will go a long way toward fostering effective school leadership.

NOTES

[1] U.S. Department of Education, Race to the Top website, undated. As of September 9, 2013: http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html

[2] From the National Center for Education Statistics, 2007–2008 Schools and Staffing Survey. As of September 9, 2013: http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass0708_2009323_p1s_06.asp

Setting Up New Principals for Success

To improve chances for positive student outcomes, school administrators and policymakers should consider implementing the following measures when hiring principals.

1 Implement Effective Hiring Practices

- **Take school context into account** when assessing each candidate's skills so principal placements match the candidate's skills with the school's specific characteristics and needs.

- **Consistently and proactively cultivate the candidate pool** by working with institutions that have programs for aspiring principals or by targeting educators who have strong leadership skills.

- **Assess the hiring process** to determine whether those responsible for hiring have the information needed to make decisions based on the strengths and weaknesses of both the school and the candidate.

- **Help orient new principals quickly to combat early turnover** by providing resources, such as mentoring, coaching, and principal support networks, to foster success early in a principal's career at a school.

2 Build Evaluation Systems That Foster Strong Principals

- **Identify the purposes of the evaluation system**, such as clarifying expectations, providing formative feedback, promoting state or district goals, or supporting management decisions.

- **Select multiple measures of performance** that are of high technical quality, aligned with standards, and designed to differentiate performance across a continuum.

- **Provide actionable feedback based on evaluations**, along with access to training and support.

- **Take continuous steps to ensure a high-quality evaluation system** by investing in evaluator training and calibration, periodically checking the technical quality of the evaluation measures, and monitoring the effects of the system on district staff.

Give Principals the Autonomy to Lead Schools

- **Consider options for autonomy levels** such as awarding increased autonomy to principals with records of success in raising student achievement and other accomplishments, such as improvements in school climate and effective allocation of resources.

- When giving principals increased decisionmaking authority, **provide professional development and other supports** to ensure that principals have the skills and knowledge to make informed decisions.
- When deciding on areas to award more autonomy, consider **the burden of decisionmaking for the principal as well as efficiencies from districtwide systems**.
- **Take the principal's expertise into account when giving increased autonomy** so a principal has autonomy in the areas in which she or he is in the best position to make informed decisions.

Provide Principals with the Resources and Supports They Need

- **Ensure that the district leadership team includes a principal representative**, and that the district checks frequently to ensure that its supports meet principals' needs.

- **Enable principals to share or delegate responsibilities**, selecting the most appropriately skilled individuals and providing support for other school staff to take on more responsibilities.
- **Reduce the administrative burden on school principals** when delegation is not feasible.
- **Support data-driven decisionmaking** by investing in training, coaching, and common planning time for teachers and principals to work together and develop a culture of evidence-based decisionmaking.
- **Provide professional development** that is tailored to the needs of the school and capabilities of the principal.

Related Reading

In this paper, we draw on extensive research conducted at RAND and elsewhere to provide guidance to district decisionmakers and others who manage school systems. What follows is a list of recommended material for those interested in learning more.

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Wallace Foundation (2013). *Districts Matter: Cultivating the Principals that Urban Schools Need*. New York: Wallace Foundation. As of August 1, 2013: http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/district-policy-and-practice/Documents/Districts-Matter-Cultivating-the-Principals-Urban-Schools-Need.pdf

About This Report

This report provides guidance on how state and district decisionmakers and others who manage school systems can create conditions for successful school leadership. To develop these recommendations, the authors draw on extensive research conducted at RAND and elsewhere. This paper was supported by the RAND Corporation.

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