

IMPLEMENTING OR EXPANDING A TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVE?

Make the Most of the Flexibility Offered by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

ABSTRACT

This work pulls together information from several sources to explore the new possibilities ESSA brings and revisit's some opportunities that continue to be available to schools and districts.

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ABOUT

The National of ESEA State Program Administrators (NAESPA) recognizes the importance of sharing best practices used throughout our collective membership. This technology white paper is designed to offer suggestions in implementing and expanding Technology Initiatives in K-12 education programs. Information found with this document is not law, do not supersede local, state, or federal laws and regulations. However, offer ideas used in varying school scenarios. This white paper is the product of a collaboration between the National Association of State ESEA Program Administrators (NAESPA) and the State Education Technology Directors Association (SETDA). We hope that this resource will be widely used and shared. If you choose to excerpt or reproduce any of the contents, in part or in full, we ask that attribution is given to NAESPA and SETDA in recognition for the work of their members and staff.



NAESPA – The National Association of ESEA State Program Administrators is a membership organization made up of State ESEA Program Administrators, and their staff from each of the states and territories, charged with managing their state-federal education program. They ensure compliance with federal regulations, but more importantly, work to see that all children — especially those living in economically disadvantaged conditions — have the opportunity to receive a high-quality education. https://www.eseanetwork.org/about



SETDA – The State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA) is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit membership association launched by state education agency leaders in 2001 to serve, support and represent their emerging interests and needs with respect to the use of technology for teaching, learning, and school operations. http://www.setda.org/about/

NAESPA/SETDA's Partnership – NAESPA and SETDA share a common interest in ensuring equity of access in education by supporting high-quality educational programs. The two organizations began collaborating in the hopes of sparking interest among state, district and school leaders to forge partnerships that leverage federal program funding, specifically with technology. The goal of this partnership is to ensure educational programs are implemented that focus on digital learning with personalized instruction for all students while providing educators with the tools, leadership, and training they need to succeed.

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INTRODUCTION

Many schools, districts, and state education agencies find themselves budgeting for the same expenditures and using many of the same programs year to year. However, we also face shrinking budgets and the expectation and obligation to continually improve instruction and services for students. These factors, along with many other pressures and incentives, must prompt us to evaluate what we are doing and what we need to change. Schools and districts across the county use federal funds to pay for technology initiatives, but is everyone fully aware of the flexibility and opportunities provided under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)? This white paper will delve into options for schools and districts thinking about implementing or expanding technology initiatives. Initiatives may be large or small scale, from school(s)-wide or district(s)-wide projects to technology initiatives involving a single grade, subject or program. We recognize that each initiative is unique, and what may work well in one situation may not achieve the same results in another. Our goal is to present high-level information that will help inform decisions about how federal, state and local funds can be used to implement or expand digital initiatives.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides new flexibility in some important areas. Although schools and districts still are accountable for helping students meet challenging state academic standards, ESSA recognizes the importance of providing students with a well-rounded education. With this shift, schools and districts may spend their federal dollars in ways they may not have considered in the past. ESSA also emphasizes the importance of connections between programs, funding sources and initiatives. It encourages partnerships to pursue common goals. LEAs interested in beginning or expanding digital learning initiatives using federal funds should examine the opportunities available to them with this flexibility. This work will pull together information from several sources to explore new possibilities ESSA brings and will revisit some opportunities that continue to be available to schools and districts.

EMPHASIS ON A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION

ESSA expands the focus from reading and math achievement to a well-rounded education. Districts must use a portion of their allocations to "develop and implement programs and activities that support access to a well-rounded education." (Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 4107). These activities are coordinated with other schools and programs and may be conducted in partnerships with institutions of higher education, nonprofits, businesses, and other organizations (more on partnerships later). Many examples of programs and activities associated with a well-rounded education are provided in ESSA, such as:

- Guidance and counseling programs for college and career;
- Arts and music programs that promote student success;
- Programming and activities to improve instruction and student participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, including computer science;
- · Accelerated learning programs for students;
- Activities to develop, implement, and strengthen the teaching of traditional American history, government and civics;
- Foreign language instruction, environmental education, programs that promote volunteerism and community involvement, programs and activities that integrate multiple disciplines; and
- Other activities and programs to support student access to, and success in, a variety of well-rounded education experiences.

Could technology help your school or district offer a more well-rounded education for your students?

PREIMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES FOR TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVES

An in-depth discussion about effective implementation of technology initiatives is beyond the scope of this work. However, we feel it is worth mentioning a few considerations.

- Policy What policies does the district have in place around technology? What policies are still needed?
- *Equity* How will the district ensure that the technology initiative will serve students equitably? How well does the initiative align with the district technology plan (Mageau & Noonoo, 2015)?
- Collaboration How can collaboration between the district Title I coordinator and the district technology experts strengthen the initiative? For example, discussion among these professionals can ensure the initiative aligns with the district's mission and goals (Mageau & Noonoo, 2015). How will the initiative support or strengthen curriculum, instruction and learning environment (Mageau & Noonoo, 2015)?
- Professional Learning What professional learning is needed to ensure the initiative succeeds? What are the school's infrastructure needs (Mageau & Noonoo, 2015)?
- Needs Assessment What key areas of need have been identified through the district and school needs assessments? How will technology help address those needs?
- *Data* How is the school and district using data to make the best, most informed decisions about the initiative?
- Monitoring How will the implementation of the program be monitored? Once implemented, how will progress be monitored? What data will be collected during the initiative to be used in evaluating its effectiveness? How will the data be collected, and by whom? (The Program Outcomes, Measures and Targets Application developed by REL Pacific may be a useful tool to monitor the initiative and help ensure project goals are accomplished).
- Research How will current, scholarly research or evidencebased practices inform and shape the digital initiative?
- Systems How will a technology initiative fit into the instructional, professional learning and other systems in place in the school and district?

It should be emphasized that planning the technology initiative should take place before the funding sources are determined. State support to districts should first explain effective spending practices, then focus on what goods and services can be purchased with specific funding sources, and last on ways funds can be coordinated (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). Therefore, the guidance offered in this section assumes that a robust, comprehensive plan has been created for the technology initiative and it is time to determine the funding sources and possible coordination of funds.

After conducting a thorough needs assessment and creating a plan that takes into account professional learning needs, policy and procedure, digital safety, and many other pre-implementation concerns, what are some options a district could use to fund its technology initiative? Consider the sources that are available. What state and local funds can be used to help fund the initiative? Are Title I, Title II, Title III, and Title IV funds available? Does the district receive Rural, Low-Income School (RLIS) or Small, Rural School Achievement Program (SRSA) grants? Subsequent sections in this work will describe some ways funds can be used to support a technology initiative. But first, let's look at ESSA and a few of the federal funding sources for public school districts and how each could be used to support a technology initiative.

Title I, Part A
- Improving Basic Programs
Operated by Local
Educational Agencies

There are some common misunderstandings around using Title I, Part A funds. For example, a commonly held misconception is that Title I funds can be used only for remedial instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2016e). In reality, in a Title I schoolwide program funds should be used to upgrade the entire educational program in the school in order to increase the achievement of the lowest-performing students. Furthermore, sometimes it might be better to focus on acceleration of student learning rather than remediation. Funds could be used to accelerate student learning through summer courses, elective courses designed to prepare students to take advanced courses and after school tutoring while students are taking advanced courses. The guidance also stresses the importance of using the school's needs assessment to drive the schoolwide plan and Title I spending. Based on the results of the needs assessment, funds could be used to purchase technology devices and provide professional learning for teachers to understand and use the technology, among many other possibilities.

Title II, Part A
- Preparing, training, and
recruiting high quality teachers
and principals

This federal funding source is designed partly to provide students from low-income families and minority students with greater access to effective educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). It helps ensure equity of educational opportunity by increasing opportunities for states and LEAs to attract, support, and retain effective educators, and examine and explore traditional and innovative uses of funds. Title Il funds could be used to support technology initiatives by funding professional learning opportunities for teachers. For example, funds could pay coaches to work with teachers on effectively integrating technology into curriculum and instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Title II funds could be used to provide personalized online professional learning for teachers to participate in a variety of learning opportunities such as online communities of practice, MOOCS (massive open online courses) and webinars. Funds from Title I and in some cases, Title III also could pay for online professional learning. Districts could use Title II funds to set up an online competency-based professional learning system for teachers.

Title III, Part A
- English Learners & Immigrant Ed

Title III funds are used to improve the English language proficiency and academic achievement of English Learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). Funds must only be used to supplement, and not supplant the services required under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI), the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (EEOA), and other requirements, including those under State or local laws. Therefore, Title III funds cannot be used to supplement the basic obligations of the LEA, including providing an educationally sound and successful LIEP (Language Instruction Educational Program) to all ELs in the district. SEAs also must reserve funds for subgrants to district(s) that have experienced significant increases in the numbers or percentages of immigrant children and youth (ESSA Section 3114(d)). Title III funds can be used to:

- Develop and implement new language instruction programs and academic content programs for English learners and immigrant children and youth, including early childhood education programs.
- Expand or enhance existing language instruction educational programs and academic content programs for English learners and immigrant children and youth. Improvements to programs could include the purchase and implementation of digital content, software and resources in another language, but these materials must be supplementary to the civil rights requirement to serve English learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).
- Implement school wide or agency wide programs for restructuring, reforming, and upgrading all relevant programs, activities, and operations relating to language instruction programs and academic content programs for English learners and immigrant children and youth.
- Funds may be used to increase collaboration through online communities of practice, sharing of digital resources and online professional development with the goal of improving instruction for English learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Title IV, Part A
- Student Support and
Academic Enrichment

Part of the Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) state block grant (Title IV, Part A) can be used to support the effective use of technology in schools. LEAs will have flexibility in spending these funds but must use at least 20 percent of the subgrant for activities to support well-rounded educational opportunities, at least 20 percent for activities to support safe and healthy students, and designate funds for activities to support the effective use of technology (U.S. Department of Education, 2016d). No more than 15 percent of funding from the technology portion of the grant may be used to purchase devices, equipment, software applications, platforms, digital instructional resources or other one-time technology purchases (ESEA section 4109(b). An individual LEA receiving an allocation of less than \$30,000 may use funds for only one (or more) of the three content areas (ESSA Section 4106 (f)). Funds, subject to the 15% rule, could be used to purchase a professional learning platform or software for virtual coaching or ondemand professional learning. The following initiatives are examples of ways the 85% of the technology portion of SSAE funds could be used:

- Professional learning, which should be ongoing and job-embedded rather than one-time sessions. Professional learning opportunities can be designed to build the capacity of teachers to use educational technology. For example, in rural schools' funds could be used to purchase a platform or software for virtual coaching of teachers, or to prepare teachers to implement blended learning projects.
- Providing personalized learning experiences for students
- Providing professional learning experiences for teachers to support STEM--teachers could be enrolled in classes to increase their capacity to offer high-quality STEM courses
- Enhancing collaboration by creating online learning communities of educators or students, perhaps with partners like museums
- Purchasing a device and software to connect schools with practicing scientists, and increase access to students for enrollment in science, technology, math and engineering courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2017)
- Accessing and adapting digital content for classroom use, including open education resources (OER)

Title V, Part B - Rural Education Initiative (REAP/SRSA)

The Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) assists rural school districts in using federal resources more effectively to improve the quality of instruction and student academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Funds may be used for:

- Teacher recruitment and retention
- Teacher professional development, including programs that train teachers to use technology to improve teaching and to train teachers of students with special needs
- Educational technology, including software and hardware, that meets the requirements of Part D of Title II
- Parent and family engagement activities
- Activities authorized under Title I, Part A (Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged)
- Activities authorized under Title II, Part A (Preparing, training, and recruiting high quality teachers and principals)
- Activities authorized under Title III (Language Instruction for English Learners and Immigrant Students)
- Activities authorized under Title IV, Part A (Student Support and Academic Enrichment)

(U.S. Department of Education, 2003; Rural and Low-Income School Program web page).

Title VII, Part B - Education for Homeless Children and Youths Grants for State and Local Activities

The McKinney-Vento Act seeks to ensure that students experiencing homelessness receive the same access to a free, appropriate public education as all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). McKinney-Vento subgrant funds may be used for many purposes, including:

- Supplemental instruction and educational services that are aligned to State standards, and which will allow the student to meet the same challenging State academic standards which all students are expected to meet;
- Professional learning for staff to better understand homelessness and the rights and educational needs of runaway and homelessness students;
- Services to attract and retain students experiencing homelessnessespecially those who are not currently enrolled in schools--in public school programs that are offered to non-homeless students;
- Summer, mentoring and before and after school programs in which tutoring or supervision of educational activities is provided by a qualified individual;
- Education for parents and guardians of students experiencing homelessness about student rights and resources that are available, in order to increase engagement in the student's education; and
- Coordination between schools and other agencies that service students experiencing homelessness to enhance services.

Students experiencing homelessness are automatically eligible for services under Title I, Part A whether or not they attend a Title I school. Funds reserved from Title I for homeless students can be used for support services like clothing and medical and dental services. Funds also can be used for educational supports like extended learning time, tutoring services and parental involvement activities.

TRANSFER OF FUNDS

Under ESSA, SEAs and LEAs have been given additional flexibility when it comes to their federal grant funds. Previously, LEAs could transfer up to 50% of their Title II, Part A (or IV, Part A, but not previously funded) funds. The reauthorization now allows LEAs the ability to transfer 100% of their Title II, Part A or IV, Part A funds. What this means is that the technology cap of 15% that is placed on Title IV, Part A funds can be averted if the LEA receives either a State RLIS (Rural Low-Income Schools) or Federal SRSA (Small Rural Schools Achievement) grant allocation under Title V, better known as the Rural Education Achievement Program or REAP. Title V is unique in that it does not have any specific allowable uses of funds as the other Titles do, rather the allowable uses ARE the same as the other Titles without all the strings attached (Ex: 15% cap on technology under Title IV, Part A). By transferring the funds to Title V an LEA can then use 100% of those funds to purchase technology, because technology is an allowable expense under Title IV, Part A. This provides LEAs with additional flexibility to spend their federal funds in a way that best fits their needs where previously this was not possible.

BRAIDING OF FUNDS

"Braiding" refers to coordinating two or more funding sources to support specific activities in an initiative (Center on School Turnaround, 2017; AGA Work Group on Blended and Braided Funding, 2014). When braiding, federal funding sources must be used to fund only permissible activities under each funding source. For example, a school implementing a technology initiative in a Title I schoolwide program might use Title I funds to purchase devices and digital learning resources around blended learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2016e). Title II funds could be designated for professional learning for teachers around effective instruction using a blended learning model. Title III funds could be used to provide access to technology specifically for English Learners. Rural school districts receiving SRSA or RLIS funds might use some of these funds to support technology instruction in their schools. Title IV, Part A funds could be used in conjunction with other ESEA program funds (e.g., Title IV; Part B; Title I, Part A; Title II) to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of complementary services (U.S. Department of Education, 2016d).

Although funds from different sources are used to support a single initiative, each funding source keeps its own specific identity. When funds are braided, they are accounted for separately under each funding source. Braiding funds helps increase efficiency by leveraging separate funding sources being used to serve similar populations (AGA Work Group on Blended and Braided Funding, 2014).

BLENDING OF FUNDS

When funds are blended, they are combined under a single set of tracking and reporting requirements and are no longer treated as separate pots of money from specific federal programs (AGA Work Group on Blended and Braided Funding, 2014). Unlike braiding, blending of funds requires statutory authority, meaning that this action must be authorized for specific federal programs through statute. Schoolwide programs under Title I are authorized to blend funds. Schools operating a schoolwide program under Title I develop a plan to upgrade the entire school rather than focusing funds on separate, additional services for low-achieving students. Critical performance activities are selected to achieve the goals outlined in the plan.

When blending funds, accountability is focused on the activities selected, so it is important that schools develop feedback loops which will allow them to gauge the progress in implementation of the activities and progress toward goals (AGA Work Group on Blended and Braided Funding, 2014). A feedback loop is a systematic method of receiving data about performance. By developing feedback loops at different stages of a process, issues can be addressed promptly rather than trying to correct failed outcomes. For example, many software programs can run reports that can provide administrators with valuable information about user activity. The reports could give administrators information about program usage, which could help them determine areas where users might need technical support or additional training.

When blending funds, expenditures are not accounted for separately according to the federal funding source. Rather, schools must maintain records showing that the schoolwide program as a whole meets the intent of each of the federal programs from which funds were consolidated (AGA Work Group on Blended and Braided funding, 2014). Schools would need to maintain records showing the funding sources being blended and the amount used from each source. Accounting barriers must be reduced so funds can be easily consolidated. For example, the SEA could create a single accounting code for blended funding projects. Also, the school must carry out the activities described in the approved plan, as it is accountable for spending the funds according to the plan.

The benefits to blending and braiding funds include flexibility, avoiding duplication, fragmentation and overlap of initiatives. Duplication, fragmentation and overlap can result when multiple organizations provide similar services. Duplication refers to the same services being offered to the same group of people by different programs or organizations (AGA Work Group on Blended and Braided funding, 2014). Fragmentation occurs when multiple organizations are providing services in a broad area of need. Overlap occurs when multiple organizations or programs have similar goals, activities and strategies, or work with the same group of people. Blending and braiding of funds can help ensure that programs and initiatives are aligned, and that ineffective and wasteful duplication, fragmentation and overlap are minimized.

BLENDING OF FUNDS

Blending and braiding funds also provides the opportunity to focus on effectiveness in addition to compliance with regulation (AGA Work Group on Blended and Braided funding, 2014). Schools have more flexibility when the emphasis shifts from strict compliance to effectiveness. Rather than sticking with activities they know will be approved, schools may feel more free to try innovative approaches, while still putting processes into place for program oversight and evaluation of effectiveness. Blending funds also allows for more streamlined fiscal accounting. Within a project, funds could be both blended (if authorized in statute) and braided.

When thinking about whether blending or braiding funds might benefit an initiative, the AGA Work Group (2014) provides five questions to consider:

- 1) Can you clearly explain the project and the desired outcomes? How would blending or braiding funds help achieve the goals of the project?
- 2) Have appropriate partners been identified for the project (for example, other districts as part of a consortium, or other external organizations)? Do the partners share similar goals to the school's goals? What are the risks in partnering with others, and is the level of risk acceptable? If funds are being pooled between the organizations, are all the partners eligible to use the pooled funds? Are all the partners in sound financial shape? Has a fiscal agent who will be responsible for the pooled funds been identified?
- **3)** Are sufficient funds available for the project? Has it been verified that funds from all partners are or will be available before the project is announced? If the school or district is required to match funds for a project, are those funds available?
- 4) Have potential risks and barriers to implementation of the project been identified? Have all legal requirements and limitations on the funds been identified and understood? If there are specific legal requirements, will the project meet the requirements, or can it be amended so it will meet them? If not, is there a process to request a waiver from some requirements? Does your organization have strong financial systems, processes and oversight in place to ensure legal requirements are met?
- **5)** Have the outcomes and goals of the project been determined? Each partner should agree to common goals. How will you and your partners measure the project's success? Have you and your partners decided how oversight of the initiative's resources will be provided over the life of the project?

CONSORTIA

The ability to form consortia, which are alliances or cooperatives of organizations, provides additional flexibility to school districts. In a consortium, the amounts of funding that each district receives from a particular source are combined; in other words, the funding for the consortium is the total of the allocations of the member districts. The funds are used to implement allowable activities across the districts participating in the consortium. Consortia offer several benefits to participating districts. First, administrative costs should be reduced. Instead of each district accounting for program funds separately, one district in the consortium agrees to act as the fiscal agent. That district would be responsible for administering the funds for the entire consortium. By working together, districts could increase efficiency and serve more students at a lower cost (U.S. Department of Education, 2016d). Smaller LEAs can especially benefit from a consortium rather than their individual allocations, which may be too small to allow them to fully meet the needs in their districts. Finally, LEAs in a consortium can learn from each other about program implementation by sharing information and expertise.

PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships with community groups, nonprofits, networks like AmeriCorps, and organizations such as museums and universities can improve the educational experience for students by aligning and maximizing resources and providing expanded opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016d). With the focus in ESSA on evidence-based practices and the requirement to implement ESSA plans, research-practice partnerships (RPPs) are also gaining attention. In research-practice partnerships, education leaders, communities and researchers work together to solve problems and improve outcomes for students (Penuel, Allen, & Finnegan, 2017). This type of partnership can help schools and districts bridge the gap between research and practice by bringing researchers and educators together to collaboratively work to solve problems (Henrick, et al, 2017).

The RPP conducts and uses research to support the practice organization (e.g., a school, district or other provider of educational services) in its improvement efforts (Henrick, et al, 2017). The partnership must be grounded in trust and in the building of relationships. Multiple stakeholders should collaborate to discuss, define and prioritize the problems. The RPP will determine the research methods and will establish systems to collect and evaluate data. The RPP suggests strategies to use to address the problems identified and recommends adjustments to the implementation of the strategies. The RPP also should share the knowledge and theory it has developed through the partnership in order to contribute to educational improvement work on a larger scale.

The collaboration and support provided by an RPP could help a school or district effectively implement a technology initiative. Although RPPs are fairly new in education, information is available to help define and build capacity for participating in RPPs and to evaluate these partnerships (see, for example, Henrick, et al, 2017 and the Research-Practice Partnership Toolkit). The AGA Work Group (2014) also provides guiding questions when a partnership is being considered (See #2, p. 8 of this white paper).

CONCLUSION

The extent to which technology is integrated into modern life and work makes it difficult to imagine a world-class education that does not include technology. Although no single initiative or program can promise a panacea for every problem that we face in education, technology offers opportunities. Technology closes distances between people, allowing us to collaborate and share knowledge, resources and experience with others. The most up-to-date information is readily available. Software and digital tools allow educators and students to communicate ideas in engaging ways. Teachers can use technology to help personalize learning for each student. The opportunities that technology presents fit well with the principles in the Every Student Succeeds Act: a wellrounded education for all students, with particular attention to students most at-risk of not achieving challenging State academic standards. The flexibility offered by ESSA and the shift toward a more well-rounded education present options for making the promise of technology a reality for schools and districts. Understanding how and when federal funds can be used to support technology initiatives, how braiding and blending funding sources might help maximize the impact of those dollars, and how forming consortia or partnerships might benefit and enrich practice can help in planning a successful initiative. The flexibility offered by ESSA allows educators to plan, fund and implement digital initiatives in ways they may not have considered previously. Becoming familiar with these options can help educators spend federal funds thoughtfully so they produce the greatest possible positive educational impact for students.

RESOURCES

The following resources are listed in the Title IV, Part A non-regulatory guidance. These resources may assist districts that are considering implementing or expanding a technology initiative.

- Future Ready Interactive Planning Dashboard and Resource Hub (http://futureready.org/about-the-effort/dashboard/) This interactive tool can help districts assess their readiness to implement a technology initiative and will create a customized report that analyzes the district's readiness in several key areas.
- Future Ready Schools Infrastructure Guide (http://tech.ed.gov/futureready/infrastructure) This resource provides guidance to district leaders in making decisions about technology initiatives, including information on devices, connectivity, infrastructure, and capacity-building.
- #GoOpen District Launch Packet (http://tech.ed.gov/openeducation/go-opendistricts/launch/) This resource offers guidance on using open education resources in the curriculum.
- Learning Analytics (http://tech.ed.gov/learning-analytics) This issue brief
 discusses educational data mining and learning analytics. Written for
 policymakers and administrators, the brief explains how learning analytics
 can be used to improve education while protecting student privacy.
- The National Education Technology Plan 2016 (http://tech.ed.gov/netp/) This plan is the educational technology policy document for the United States.

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