

PROFICIENCY-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING IN OREGON: AN EVOLUTION FROM STATE POLICY TO PRACTICE

This paper describes the evolution of Oregon's state policy referred to as "Credit for Proficiency" to a proficiency-based teaching and learning system focused on teachers' practice and student learning.

Background

In 2002, the State Board of Education approved the policy "Districts may award credit based on proficiency" referred to as "Credit for Proficiency." With Oregon's standards-based system as the foundation, districts could provide students the opportunity to earn graduation credits by demonstrating what they know and can do as an alternative to the Carnegie Unit based on "seat time."

The Credit for Proficiency policy was guided by three purposes: (1) To offer flexibility to districts and schools as they meet each student's diverse needs, interests, and level and rate of learning; (2) To create additional options for students based on Oregon's high standards and broad accountability system; and (3) To empower and encourage local decision-making and creativity.

In 2004, the Oregon Department of Education began a two-year pilot project with seven school districts selected to implement the Credit for Proficiency policy. Pilot school districts included: Greater Albany, Beaverton, Canby, Gresham-Barlow, Hood River Valley, Scio and Wallowa. The districts developed local implementation policies and processes, provided local and state professional development and documented their implementation progress. The results of the pilot reinforced the importance of local flexibility in meeting individual student needs and engaging staff in new approaches to teaching and learning. A focus on standards and defined performance levels provided consistency in maintaining appropriate rigor for awarding high school credit. <http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=2974>
Practitioners in these districts led the way in implementing Oregon's Credit for Proficiency policy.

In January 2007, the State Board of Education approved new, more rigorous graduation requirements for the Oregon Diploma and extended the Credit for Proficiency policy as an option for earning credit: *"A key feature of the future diploma will be wider use of proficiency, ensuring that all students will have the opportunity to choose to earn credit by demonstrating proficiency."* The Credit for Proficiency Task Force was commissioned in 2008-2009 to develop recommendations for implementation as part of the new Oregon Diploma. The task force addressed policy and practice issues, examined models, and recommended criteria and guidelines to ensure that rules are applied consistently across the state and allow for credit to be earned through multiple pathways and assessments.
<http://www.ode.state.or.us/teachlearn/certificates/diploma/final-board-summary-report.pdf>

To offer additional flexibility and guidance to districts, the State Board of Education adopted the Credit Options Rule (OAR 581-022-1131) in 2009, following recommendations of the Credit for Proficiency Task Force. This rule provides a policy framework for districts to develop their local processes and protocols for awarding proficiency-based credit. OAR 581-022-1131 outlines

several options for students to earn graduation credits within Oregon’s standards-based system. The rule allows districts and charter schools to grant credit if the student demonstrates defined levels of proficiency or mastery of recognized standards (e.g., state academic content standards and essential skills/career-related learning standards, industry-based or other national or international standards) through a variety of options, including: inside the classroom, outside of the classroom where hours of instruction may vary, through documentation of prior learning, by appropriate examination, or by any combination thereof.

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/teachlearn/standards/creditforproficiency/581-022-1131.pdf>

In addition, ODE revised the Oregon Student Accounting Manual to offer districts a method to account for students enrolled in an out-of-class credit for proficiency opportunity.

https://district.ode.state.or.us/apps/info/docs/11-09_Edited_Cumulative_ADM_Manual_20092010.pdf

Since the adoption of the state Credit for Proficiency policy and Credit Options rule, proficiency-based education continues to grow in Oregon and interest among school districts and others is gaining. Implementation has spread among districts across the state. Prior to 2009, implementation was mainly focused on Credit for Proficiency as an option for earning elective credit for out-of-class experiences. Since then, more schools are implementing proficiency-based practices in the classroom in core content areas. Further, what began as a policy for awarding credit has evolved into the broader concept “Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning” focused on instructional practice with defined attributes designed to improve student learning.

This broader concept of proficiency-based teaching and learning is not about awarding credit or changing the grading system. While structural changes may occur in a proficiency-based system, it goes much deeper; to the critical work of teaching and learning. Moreover, proficiency-based teaching and learning is not a policy or program, nor a specific strategy or technique. Rather, it is a collection of effective instructional practices centered on student learning and standards-based achievement that ensures all students are prepared for college and careers.

Proficiency-based teaching and learning practices are based on principles of standards-based achievement, student-centered instruction and assessment techniques, and collaborative professional learning for teachers.

-Oregon Proficiency Project

Proficiency-based teaching and learning builds upon and enhances standards-based education with the following common features:

Student centered instruction: The individual student is at the center of the learning process; the teacher acts on the expectation that all students will achieve at a proficient level given the necessary supports. Teachers adjust instruction to allow students to learn at their own rates and provide supports to all students.

Standards-based: Explicit learning outcomes or targets are derived from well-defined standards that clearly articulate what students must know and be able to do.

Student engagement: Once students understand the learning targets and proficiency levels to be attained, they take responsibility and ownership for their learning with appropriate teacher support. Students are active, intentional partners in the learning process.

Students are evaluated on performance: Students demonstrate that they have become proficient at each learning outcome/target. Students are allowed multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning. Grading and credits are based on demonstrated proficiency only.

Formative assessment: On-going formative assessments are used throughout the instructional cycle to monitor student progress, provide feedback on learning goals, adjust instruction and provide additional supports.

Collaboration among educators: Teachers work collaboratively with colleagues to improve instruction based on student outcomes. Professional learning communities are focused and targeted on instructional effectiveness.

Instructional leadership: The principal and district office create the necessary conditions in the school to support teachers' proficiency-based practice.

Learning vs. time based: Students move at their own pace. Seat time is not the measure of learning.

Organizational Framework

The proficiency movement in Oregon has been an evolution over the past decade and largely grassroots, resulting in wide variations of understanding and practice. Though similar language is sometimes used, the meaning and practice is not always the same. To realize the potential of proficiency-based education to improve student learning and performance, it is important to develop a common understanding statewide with a focus on improving teaching and learning.

Using a conceptual model adapted from the PELP Coherence Framework (Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University), the broader conception of proficiency-based teaching and learning is described below drawing upon the practices of implementing districts in Oregon. The PELP framework focuses on the instructional core.

Note: the concept of the "Instructional Core" and "Coherence Framework" is a fundamental component of Harvard's *Public Education Leadership Project* (PELP). To learn more about PELP and the instructional core, click here: <http://www.hbs.edu/pelp/framework.html>

The Instructional Core

The instructional core (Diagram 1) represents "the complex and demanding work of teaching and learning" (Childress, Elmore, Grossman & King, 2007). Harvard's Richard Elmore describes it as the dynamic relationship between teacher, student, and content and is fundamental to improving student learning and performance. The instructional core includes three interrelated components: teachers' knowledge and skill; students' engagement in their own learning, and academically challenging content:

Teacher: The work a teacher does to create the conditions and develop student capacity to learn and apply content based on clearly defined instructional models that inform the

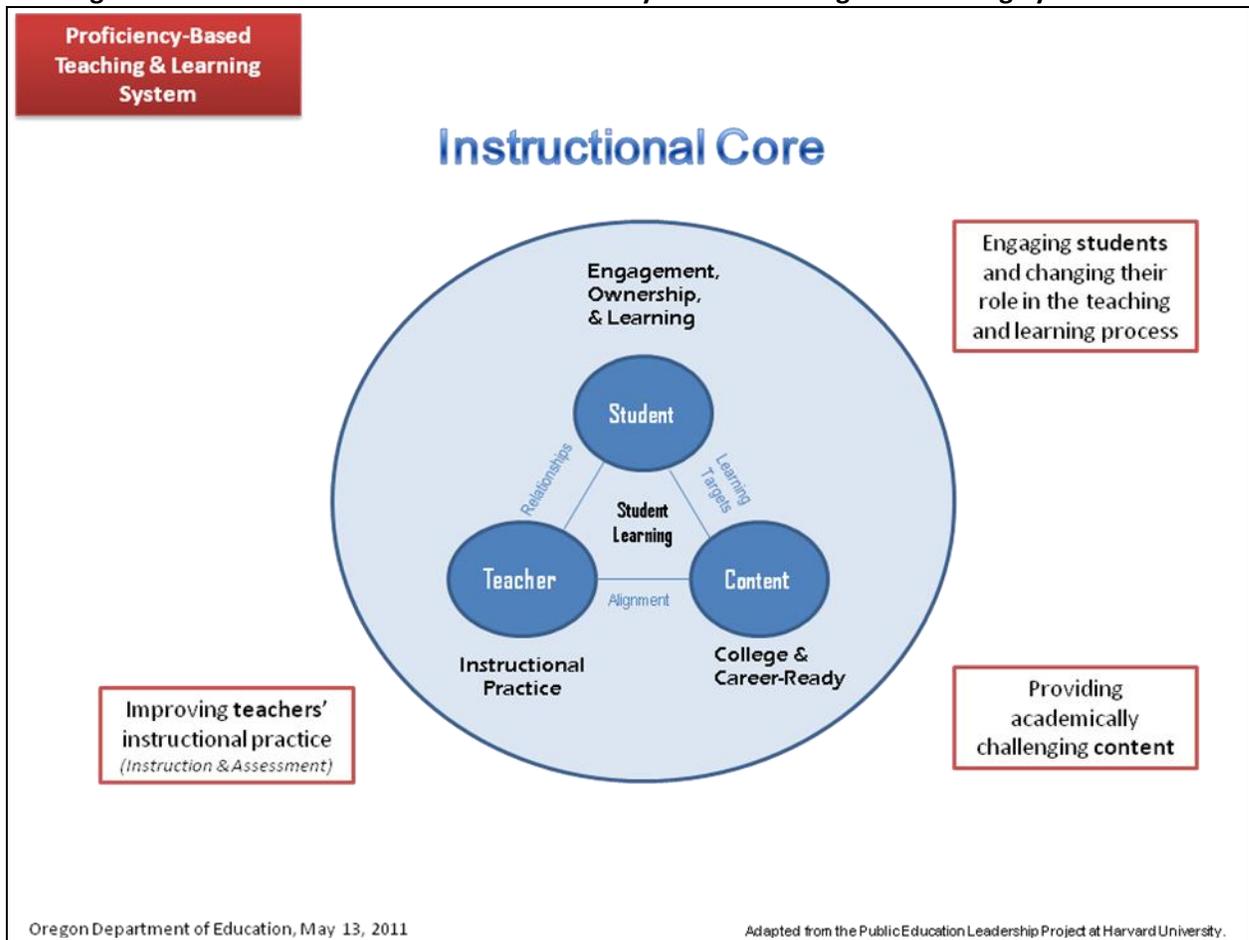
tasks they select or design, the pedagogy they use, how they support and monitor learning, what they expect students to complete, and how they judge and support a proficient performance.

Student: The work a student does, with guidance and assistance from a teacher, to learn and apply content, to reflect on what and how they have learned, and to be able to assess their own learning and performance against expected learning and performance.

Content: The concepts, thinking and reasoning processes, skills, and procedures that students are expected to learn and apply in specific content areas and at specific grade levels. These are defined by state and local standards and assessments.

Improving teachers' instructional practice is paramount to improving student learning and achievement (City, et al., 2011; Childress, et al. 2007; Fullan, 2010; 2011; Heritage, 2010; Marzano, 2008). Fullan (2011) contends that instruction and learning should be a central driving force for system-wide change, "once you dwell on instruction the whole system can mobilize to that end."

Diagram 1. The Instructional Core in a Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning System

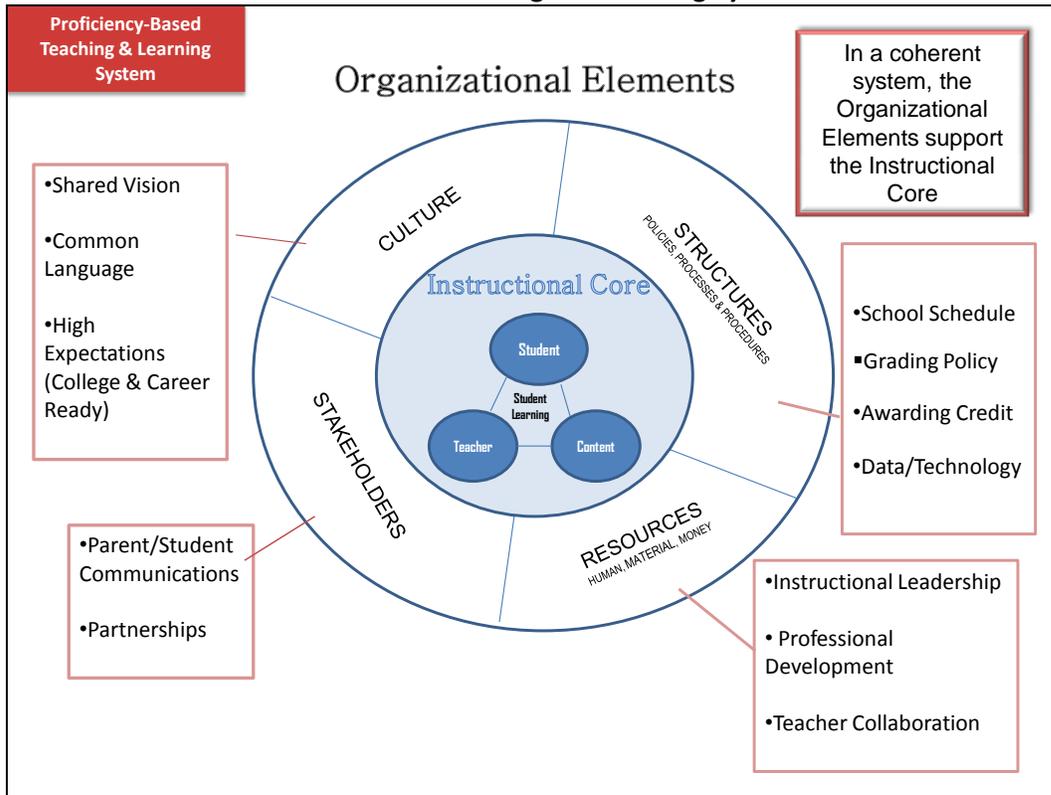


Organizational Elements Supporting the Instructional Core

The PELP Coherence Framework places the Instructional Core at the center of the districts’ work to improve student performance. According to Elmore, the way to improve student learning and performance is through the instructional core. Everything else can only affect student learning by “influencing what goes on inside the core” (City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel, 2010).

The instructional core is surrounded by a district-wide strategy and key organizational elements (Diagram 2). The PELP Coherence Framework includes five organizational elements critical to the successful implementation of a district-wide improvement strategy: culture, structures and systems, resources, and stakeholders. A district-wide improvement strategy brings these elements into a coherent and integrated relationship with the objective of raising student performance.

Diagram 2. Organizational Elements and Supports for the Instructional Core in a Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning System



Using the PELP conceptual model, the instructional core is at the heart of proficiency-based teaching and learning. The PELP Coherence Framework can help leaders implement a coherent strategy to support proficiency-based teaching and learning to improve student performance. District strategies must be intentional to support the instructional core, i.e. the activities that increase teachers’ knowledge and skill, change students’ role in the teaching and learning process, and ensure that curriculum is aligned with rigorous standards.

From the state level, policies and resources should be directed toward supporting district strategies to strengthen the instructional core. Fullan (2011) advises policymakers that an effective and faster way to achieve school improvement goals is through an investment in social capital, i.e. supporting collaborative groups to develop human capital or teachers’ knowledge and skills.

In the following tables the PELP Coherence Framework is adapted to illustrate the instructional core (Table 1) and organizational elements necessary to support the instructional core in a proficiency-based teaching and learning system (Table 2). The descriptions are informed by the practices of implementing school districts in Oregon.

Table 1. Proficiency-Based Practices in the Instructional Core

The table below describes quality proficiency practices in the instructional core in a proficiency-based teaching and learning system.

Instructional Core	Proficiency-Based Practices
<p style="text-align: center;">Teacher</p> <p><i>Instructional Practices</i></p>	<p>Proficiency-based practices are grounded in evidence-based research on effective instructional and assessment techniques.</p> <p>Teachers are skilled at adapting curriculum and lessons to learning outcomes/targets.</p> <p>Instructional techniques, including assessment, expand the role and responsibilities of students as learners, ensuring that students are active, intentional partners in the learning process.</p> <p>Teachers adjust instruction to allow students to learn at individualized rates and provide individualized supports to all students, drawing from a full portfolio of tools, rubrics, and technology aimed at including those not yet meeting standards as well as those exceeding standards.</p> <p>Instruction allows for differentiated interventions to ensure all students receive additional time and support for learning.</p> <p>Assessment practices drive the instructional cycle from beginning to end. Teachers use on-going assessment to systematically monitor students’ learning progress, adjust instruction, and give students prescriptive feedback on learning goals. Formative assessments are used to develop explicit student learning goals based on what students already know and focus instruction on what students still need to learn. Moderated summative assessments are used to provide information on student proficiency of key learning targets and to plan individualized remediation and extension activities for students based on their rate of proficiency development.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Student</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Engagement & Ownership</i></p>	<p>Students are involved as active, intentional partners and taking personal responsibility for pursuing and reaching learning outcomes/targets.</p> <p>Students understand explicit learning objectives/targets in each lesson, unit, course, and school year.</p> <p>Students can discuss their own learning outcome data as well as next steps toward their learning goals.</p> <p>Students take ownership of their learning.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Content</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Standards & Curriculum Alignment</i></p>	<p>Curriculum and instruction are aligned to rigorous, well-defined standards for success in postsecondary education and careers.</p> <p>Learning outcomes are expressed in explicit learning targets that give students a clear understanding of the standards and essential skills they must meet in each course.</p> <p>Students are allowed multiple opportunities to demonstrate they have become proficient at each learning outcome/target.</p>

Table 2. Organizational Elements and Supports for the Instructional Core

The following organizational elements work together in a coherent and integrated way to support the instructional core in a proficiency-based teaching and learning system.

Elements	Supports
<p style="text-align: center;">Culture</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Shared behaviors and norms</i></p>	<p>A shared vision for student learning expresses the mission of preparing all students for success in postsecondary education and careers.</p> <p>Establishing a culture of high expectations, collaboration, and inclusion is a key to producing equitable results for all students.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Structures</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>How people are organized</i></p>	<p>School schedule is designed to support teacher collaboration and the development of expertise throughout the instructional cycle.</p> <p>School schedule is flexible and provides time for individualized student learning support.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Systems</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Policies, processes and procedures</i></p>	<p>Grading is based on proficiency of learning targets, which make learning expectations straightforward and transparent to students.</p> <p>Credit is awarded when students meet proficiency standards rather than accumulated seat time.</p> <p>Robust data systems allow access to multi-dimensional student information.</p> <p>Districts evaluate policies, practices, and structures to ensure the necessary conditions exist to support the implementation of proficiency-based teaching and learning practices.</p>

<p>Resources</p> <p><i>People (social & human capital), financial, and material</i></p>	<p>Professional Learning Communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and principals support one another to continuously develop expertise in teaching and learning. • Teachers use regular collaboration time to study student work together, design interventions for students, discuss adjustments to instructional strategies, etc. • Teachers carry out peer observation in one another’s classrooms to provide objective, non-evaluative feedback. • Teacher development can be accomplished through instructional leadership from principals and/or highly skilled instructional coaching. <p>Instructional Leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals develop expertise as instructional leaders through coaching, peer networks, etc. in order to lead the development of a proficiency-based teaching and learning system. <p>Financial Capacity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student-centered, performance-based, transparent budget system design distributes resources to best support student learning.
<p>Stakeholders</p> <p><i>People inside and outside the organization who can influence success of the districts’ strategy</i></p>	<p>Districts /schools engage the community in the implementation of proficiency-based teaching and learning through intentional communication with stakeholders.</p> <p>Communication of the vision and value of proficiency-based teaching and learning practices will use research and field evidence where appropriate.</p>

Resources

Oregon Department of Education

The Oregon Department of Education provides policy and guidance documents on the Oregon Diploma website so assist school districts with implementation.

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=35>

The Oregon Proficiency Project

The Oregon Business Council (OBC), in March 2009, published a white paper describing current proficiency-based practices in Oregon and encouraging adoption of these practices statewide. <http://www.ode.state.or.us/teachlearn/standards/creditforproficiency/proficiency-based-instruction-and-assessment.pdf>. In 2009-2010, OBC and Employers for Educational Excellence (E3) launched the Oregon Proficiency Project.

The two key challenges – what is proficiency-based education and how do we get more of it – were addressed by the Oregon Proficiency Project, conducted by the [Oregon Business Council \(OBC\)](#) and [Employers for Education Excellence \(E3\)](#) and funded by the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#). The work was composed of 1) intensive technical support in two pilot sites (Woodburn's [Academy of International Studies \(AIS\)](#) and Beaverton's [Health and Science School \(HS2\)](#), provided by the [Center for Educational Leadership \(CEL\)](#) at the University of Washington, 2) field research with a number of early practitioners in the state and 3) policy discussions with education leaders.

The project participants came to the shared understanding that proficiency-based education is guided by principles of student-centered teaching, standards-based achievement, ongoing assessment, engaging students' initiative, collaborative professional learning for instructors and development of supportive instructional leadership. Students learn at their own pace – time becomes a variable.

Key conclusions of the project are: effective instruction appears to be a vital missing link; proficiency-based education heightens teaching effectiveness; it has well defined attributes; it has potential to elevate public education performance; and it is scalable. Documents posted on this web site contain detailed information about the work that was done – structures, processes, outcomes and tools. These are posted in the belief that they will be helpful to practitioners.

<http://www.k-12leadership.org/professional-development/proficiency-project>

Phase 1 Conclusion:

Effective instruction appears to be a vital missing link; proficiency-based education heightens teaching effectiveness; it has well defined attributes; it has potential to elevate public education performance; and it is scalable.

- **Phase 1 Report: Defining Practice, Informing Policy**

http://depts.washington.edu/uwcel/e3_obc/OPP%20Phase%201%20Report.pdf

- **Defining Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning**

http://depts.washington.edu/uwcel/e3_obc/Proficiency%20Based%20Learning%20System%2011.8.10.pdf

Phase 2 Conclusions:

Proficiency-based education is a collection of practices, and the heart of proficiency-based education, instructional practices, is centered in the classroom. Deep changes in instructional practices are needed, including the use of formative assessment methods which are used to inform instructional strategies. Proficiency-based education is not a specific strategy or technique....it's about deep fundamental changes in teaching and learning.

- **Phase 2 Report: Defining Practice, Informing Policy: Practitioner Networks Voice a Call to Action** http://depts.washington.edu/uwcel/opp_phase2/OPP%20Phase%20%20Report.pdf

Business Education Compact (BEC)

The Business Education Compact (BEC) has been a major proponent, leader, and source of educator training in proficiency-based education since 2005. They have trained nearly 1,800 Oregon teachers and administrators.

- **BEC Proficiency Website** www.becpdx.org
- **A Framework for Proficiency-based Teaching & Learning** (available Fall 2011) designed around a standards-based teaching and learning cycle, including: Target, Plan, Teach/Learn, Assess, Verify, Reflect and provides teacher and student rubrics that describe: Beginning, Emerging, Proficient, Masters level performance.
- **BEC Proficiency Portal:** a collection of resource documents developed by teachers <http://bec.orvsd.org/welcome-and-portal-purpose>
- **Today's OEA article** highlighting proficiency practices: http://www.becpdx.org/pdf/ctdi/1106Praise_for_Proficiency_Todays_OEA.pdf

ExEL Algebra Project

Oregon's four largest school districts (Portland Public Schools, Salem-Keizer, Beaverton, and Eugene) and the Oregon Department of Education collaborated on a proficiency-based Algebra project in 2007-2009 through the Harvard Executive Leadership Program for Educators (ExEL).

<http://community.harvard.edu/programs/executive-leadership-program-educators>

School districts in the ExEL Algebra Project used proficiency-based teaching and learning to support equity and the instructional core in achieving high-quality mathematics education for all students.

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/teachlearn/standards/creditforproficiency/prfcncy-handouts.pdf>

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