

What Works for Third Grade Reading

NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Working Paper

Regular Attendance: High Quality Birth-to-Eight Learning Environments with Regular Attendance

Table of Contents

- I. Pathways Measure of Success**
- II. Definitions**
- III. Regular Attendance: Why It Matters**
- IV. Regular Attendance: Connections with Other Pathways Measures of Success**
- V. Policy Options to Improve Regular Attendance**
 - Chronic Absence Definition for North Carolina
 - Chronic Absence as a Measure in North Carolina ESSA Plans
 - Data Collection, Cross-Agency Data Analytics and Public Reporting
 - A Standard Early Warning System for PreK through Third Grade
- VI. Promising and Proven Practice Options to Improve Regular Attendance**
 - Expanding Access to School Health and Mental Health Professionals
 - Developing Family/School/Community Partnerships
 - Implementing Research-Based Messaging with Parents
 - Establishing a School Climate Improvement Process
 - Providing Wraparound Supports to Meet Family and Community Need
- VII. Evidence-Based and Promising Program and Capacity-Building Options to Improve Regular Attendance**
 - Response to Intervention (RTI)
 - Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)
 - The Responsive Classroom Approach (RC)
 - Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)
 - Support Teacher and Administrator Development

Appendix A. The Data Quality Campaign

I. Pathways Measure of Success

Percentage of children with regular attendance in early care and education programs and elementary school (K-3).

II. Definitions

The following terms are referenced in this brief:

Attendance Works is a state and national initiative that promotes awareness of school attendance and offers guidance to improve attendance rates based upon a systemic approach to chronic absence.ⁱ Key elements of this approach are actionable data, capacity building, shared accountability and positive messaging.ⁱⁱ

Average daily attendance is the percentage of a school's student body that attends on a typical day. The definition is the same nationwide but does not provide student-level data.ⁱⁱⁱ Average daily attendance does not reveal the number of students who have missed many days of school and who are at risk academically.^{iv}

Chronic absenteeism is generally defined as a student missing 10 percent or more of the school year, regardless of the reason for the absence. In North Carolina, this would translate to approximately 18 days or more of absences.

Data Quality Campaign is a nearly decade-old national effort funded by philanthropy to support states in the development and use of education data. It has identified and tracks ten essential elements of statewide longitudinal data systems and has offered policy and practice recommendations.^v

Every Student, Every Day is a federal initiative sponsored jointly by the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice. It has been designed to help coordinate systems of support among state and local education, health, housing, and justice systems to address chronic absenteeism. An online toolkit is available to help various community stakeholders design and implement activities to address chronic absenteeism.^{vi}

National Center on School Climate supports schools to integrate academic instruction and social-emotional learning, with the goal of enhancing student performance, preventing drop outs, reducing physical violence and bullying, and developing healthy and positively-engaged adults.^{vii}

III. Regular School Attendance: Why It Matters

Students who are chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade are much less likely to read at grade level by third grade and are more likely to have poor attendance in later grades.^{viii} Chronic absenteeism in the early grades is associated with lower academic achievement,^{ix} truancy in middle school, school dropout, delinquency, and substance abuse.^x The educational experience of those children who do attend school regularly also may be adversely affected as teachers divert their attention to meet the learning and social needs of chronically absent children when they return to school.

Consistent school attendance in the early grades helps boost children’s academic learning, achievement, and motivation and can help close the achievement gap for disadvantaged students, starting in the early grades.^{xi}

Young children, particularly those with multiple risk factors, benefit from regular attendance at high quality early education programs, where they learn to work on tasks independently and follow directions. Child-care settings also provide opportunities to identify warning signs and to establish good attendance and learning habits. Chronic absence for preschool-aged children correlates with weaker kindergarten readiness scores, including letter recognition and pre-literacy skills. Chronic absence in the prekindergarten and the early grades has been found to lead to lower third-grade reading and math test scores, absenteeism problems and lower achievement in later grades, retention in grade, dropping out of high school, substance use, and later delinquent and criminal behavior.^{xii}

Nationwide, 11 percent of elementary school students are chronically absent, and there are racial and ethnic gaps. The numbers are similar in North Carolina. In 2013-14, 10 percent of North Carolina students attending a school with prekindergarten, kindergarten, first, second and/or third grade were chronically absent.^{xiii} Two-thirds of LEAs had from 5 to 15 percent of their elementary-school students chronically absent, but percentages ranged from a low of 0.4 percent to a high of 26.4 percent. Some outliers may be explained by errors in data collection. The chart below shows disparities in chronic absence in North Carolina by race and ethnicity.^{xiv}

Chronic Absence among NC Elementary-School Students, by Race/Ethnicity, 2013-14	
Hispanic	10%
Asian	11%
Black	12%
White	13%
Two or more race	17%
American Indian	23%
Pacific Islander/Hawaiian	24%

The rate of chronic absence among North Carolina children increases in the higher grades—by fourth grade, 21 percent of students are chronically absent.^{xv} Among students living in lower-income families, the percentage of students who are chronically absent increases slightly from fourth to eighth grade. Among students with disabilities, the increase is greater. Without student-specific longitudinal data, the reasons for this increase cannot be determined.

Chronic Absence among NC 4th and 8th Graders, 2011-13^{xvi}			
Grade	All students	Lower-income students	Students with disabilities
4 th grade	21%	24%	28%
8 th grade	21%	26%	33%

IV. Regular Attendance: Connections to Other Pathways Measures of Success

Just like the domains of child development, the Pathways Measures of Success are highly interconnected. The table and text below outline the measures that *influence* or *are influenced by* Regular Attendance.

Health and Development on Track, Beginning at Birth	Supported and Supportive Families and Communities	High Quality Birth-through-age Eight Learning Environments with Regular Attendance
Social-Emotional Health	Formal and Informal Family Supports	High Quality Birth-through-age-Eight Early Care and Education
Physical Health	Safe at Home	

Social-Emotional Health

Social-emotional health and self-regulation are closely tied to regular school attendance through multiple pathways. Children who struggle with social-emotional skill gaps early in schooling are more likely to become chronically absent.^{xvii} Children who have trouble self-regulating also are more likely to be disciplined in ways that remove them from the classroom (suspensions and expulsions), further contributing to chronic absence.^{xviii} Discipline practices that support social-emotional development and learning can help students develop better self-regulation skills, remain in the classroom, and be better engaged with school.^{xix}

Physical Health

Health issues—including physical, mental, behavioral, vision, dental, and social/emotional development—are leading contributors to chronic absenteeism.^{xx} Asthma has been shown to be a particularly strong factor in chronic absenteeism, with the severity of the asthma impacting the degree of absenteeism.^{xxi} Children from poorer families are both more likely to suffer from chronic health issues, including asthma, and more likely to miss school because of these issues, than their wealthier peers.^{xxii}

Formal and Informal Family Supports

Family and community factors, including domestic and neighborhood violence, food insecurity, lack of transportation, and other stressors of living with low income have been shown to negatively impact children’s school attendance.^{xxiii} A recent report based on 2013-2014 national attendance data found that of the 6.5 million chronically absent students nationally, half live in only four percent of the school districts. The data also reveal that chronic absenteeism is not unusual in areas of concentrated poverty.^{xxiv}

Students who are highly mobile (moving in and out of schools during the school year) and those who face housing insecurity and homelessness are also more likely than their non-mobile and non-homeless peers to experience higher levels of chronic absenteeism.^{xxv} Formal and informal support systems for parents can help to alleviate the stressors of living with low-income and result in more regular school attendance. See also the *Pathways Formal and Informal Family Supports* working paper.

Safe at Home

The failure of parents to get their children to school on a regular basis may be viewed by the child welfare system as “educational neglect.” In this context, chronic absence may be a symptom of broader

family challenges and dysfunction including mental health problems, domestic violence, or substance use.^{xxvi} See also the Pathways *Safe at Home* working paper.

High Quality Birth-through-age-Eight Early Care and Education

School Climate. Schools are increasingly tracking attendance as an indicator of school climate and quality. Schools that successfully engage with students and parents, operate as welcoming places, successfully manage transitions, and address students' non-academic barriers to learning are likely to experience more regular attendance.^{xxvii} In some school districts, the availability of district-provided transportation also contributes to better school attendance.^{xxviii} School climate and culture factors can also pose barriers to regular attendance. Chaotic school environments, lack of consistent discipline or engaging instruction, and low parent engagement can contribute to lower student attendance rates.^{xxix}

Transportation. In some school districts, the availability of district-provided transportation also contributes to better school attendance.^{xxx} The national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading has identified transportation issues as an important contributor to chronic absence.^{xxxi} It suggests the use of transit passes and car pools as ways to get otherwise absent students to school. A Connecticut school district analyzed absence data for students who walk to school versus students who were bussed. Learning that walkers had higher absenteeism rates, bus routes were increased.^{xxxii}

Suspensions and Expulsions. Suspensions and expulsions also result in students being away from their classrooms and schools. Currently, suspensions and expulsions occur at high rates in prekindergarten and elementary school,^{xxxiii} impact boys more than girls, and children of color more than their white peers.^{xxxiv} When a child is suspended, he or she falls behind on schoolwork as the result of lost instructional time. Removing a child from enriching early learning environments can also hinder social skill development and mask undiagnosed disabilities.^{xxxv} Evidence shows suspensions do not work to improve either student behavior or school climate.^{xxxvi}

Corporal Punishment. Corporal punishment is most likely to be used in elementary schools and for subjective offenses categorized as “disruptive behavior” and “insubordination.” There is no state law in North Carolina prohibiting the use of corporal punishment in the public schools. Although corporal punishment has been banned by all but a handful of school districts, there were 73 uses of corporal punishment in four North Carolina school districts in 2015-16 (Robeson, Graham, Macon and Wilson), which represents a 50 percent decrease from the 174 cases reported the previous year.^{xxxvii} The federal Secretary of Education released a letter in 2016 urging states to end the use of corporal punishment in schools.^{xxxviii}

V. Policies to Increase Regular Attendance

The literature base suggests that the key to reducing chronic absenteeism is policy and practice change in the areas of **tracking and using actionable, responsive data** and **engaging families and communities**, and evidence-based and evidence-informed programs that **foster a positive and engaging school climate**. All three of those approaches are addressed below.

Chronic Absence Definition for North Carolina. *Establish a statewide standard definition of chronic absence, such as missing 10 percent of the school year, regardless of the reason, and mandate development of district plans to reduce absenteeism.*

As of 2013, 21 states had established standard definitions of chronic absence, although these vary by state. Seventeen states publicly report on chronic absenteeism as part of district or school report cards.^{xxxix} There is no statewide definition of chronic absenteeism in North Carolina and no state-level chronic absentee data collection and analysis.

Several states have taken further intentional actions to increase regular attendance, such as:

- Oregon and Washington have passed legislation to develop and implement plans to reduce chronic absenteeism.
- Virginia and New York (and other states) have developed training modules, early warning systems, data collection efforts, and resources to support cross-sector collaboration in the reduction of chronic absence.
- Hawaii’s Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project includes a series of public service announcements.^{xi}
- Connecticut’s State Department of Education has been intentional in its attention to improving school attendance, including the development of a comprehensive web presence with policy, data and other resources.^{xii}

The North Carolina *School Attendance and Student Accounting Manual 2016-2017* specifies that beginning at age five all North Carolina children are entitled to attend public school. At the age of seven, school attendance is compulsory, and students are expected to be in attendance each day that school is in session.^{xiii} While the manual defines lawful and unlawful absences, suspensions and expulsions, it does not define chronic absence.^{xliii}

Chronic Absence as a Measure in North Carolina ESSA Plans. *Include chronic absence as a non-academic indicator to measure school quality or student success in its state (and local school district) Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plans.*^{xliv}

On June 26, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction filed its preliminary federal ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) plan.^{xlv} The plan includes the adoption of a “Whole Child, Whole School, Whole Community” model. The model is based on five tenets that may be expected to have some impact on student attendance. These tenets are that students are healthy, safe, engaged, challenged and supported. The plan identifies “average attendance rate” as one of the measures to be reported as part of the plan.

North Carolina could include chronic absence as a non-academic indicator to measure school quality or student success in its state (and local school district) Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plans.^{xlvi} Chronic absence meets or exceeds all of the rigorous criteria ESSA has established for accountability measures and is:

- An early predictor of student performance
- One of the only available measures for the early grades (before the “tested years,” which start in third grade)
- An actionable indicator
- Already reported by school districts to the U.S. Department of Education
- Based on data districts already maintain in their systems

Data Collection, Cross-Agency Data Analytics and Public Reporting. *Incorporate the statewide standard definition of chronic absence into the NC Longitudinal Data System and link databases across agencies to improve and report available information related to chronic absences.*

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) recommends states to report on chronic absence rates. In a recent review of chronic absence data, the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution argued for it to become an indicator required of all school districts under the newly reauthorized ESSA. The authors also argued that suspensions and expulsions be included in counting and understanding chronic absenteeism.^{xlvii} The national Data Quality Campaign recommends that state policymakers create data governance structures and connect data “across all agencies critical to student success,” beginning in early childhood and continuing through K-12 schooling and into post-secondary education and the workforce.^{xlviii} See Appendix A for the Data Quality Campaign’s 10 recommended best practices in data collection and monitoring.

Chronic attendance data reported through school or district report cards should include prekindergarten through third grade and should be disaggregated by age, grade, race, ethnicity, poverty status, and zip code. In partnership with Applied Survey Research, Attendance Works has created self-calculating spreadsheets and other tools to analyze attendance on a student-by-student basis. Separate modules are available for elementary, middle and high schools.^{xlix} Examples of other how other states use chronic absence data follow.

- The Rhode Island Coalition’s Data Hub compares academic performance of chronically absent students to their regularly attending peers.ⁱ Rhode Island recently passed legislation requiring schools to monitor discipline data for disproportionalities as well.
- As a part of its state-led effort to focus on attendance, Connecticut introduced the Next Generation Accountability System, a comprehensive set of performance metrics that offer a more complete picture of school performance.ⁱⁱ This system allows anyone to look up school districts and individual schools and view current data on such indicators as chronic absences. In the 2015-2016 school year, 9.6 percent of students were chronically absent, as compared with 11.5 percent three years earlier. This translates to over 10,000 more students attending school daily.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Grand Rapids, Michigan, reduced their chronic absence rate by more than 25 percent using actionable data, data teams, and family engagement. Schools partnered with a family messaging campaign and used a challenge competition to encourage regular attendance habits. Data collection, usage, and transparency were key to making this effort successful.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

North Carolina has developed a linked, longitudinal data system that integrates and tracks select information from participating agencies and programs to monitor outcomes and the effectiveness of services. Chronic absenteeism data could be included in this system, developed as part of the state’s Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge. Its web portal already integrates data from the following programs:

- Subsidized Child Care Assistance Program
- NC Pre-K
- Early Intervention/IDEA Part C
- Vital Records
- Child Protective Services

- SNAP (Food and Nutrition Services)
- TANF (Work First)
- Preschool Exceptional Children, Idea Part B, 619
- Head Start/Early Head Start.^{liv}

According to the Data Quality Campaign, North Carolina has not yet met the following three of the ten benchmarks:

- Benchmark #2: Create stable, sustainable support for the P-20/workforce state longitudinal data system
- Benchmark #5: Provide timely, role-based access to data, including access to parents, teachers and other stakeholders identified by the data governance entity
- Benchmark #6: Create progress reports with student-level data for educators, students, and parents^{lv}

A Standard Early Warning System for PreK through Third Grade. *Establish policy guidance for a cross-district standardized Early Warning System framework, including early grades attendance data, by which schools can identify and support students at risk of academic failure. This will likely require a partnership between the academic research community, the Department of Public Instruction and a group of school districts willing to participate in an early warning learning consortium.*

Early warning systems were first created at the high school level to identify students at risk of dropping out. The systems use student data to monitor, identify, and intervene with those at risk of failure to graduate. Such systems are used by half of all school districts nationally.^{lvi} These systems identify students at-risk of missing key educational milestones, determine their needs, and identify interventions to help them get back on track. Research has shown that chronic absence is an important factor in early warning systems designed to identify students at risk for dropping out.^{lvii}

These systems identify students at-risk of missing key educational milestones, determine their needs, and identify interventions for them to help them get back on track. Data commonly used includes attendance, behavior, and course performance, although other data, such as homelessness or child welfare system involvement, could also be analyzed. The City of Baltimore created an early warning system at the middle school level, including such indicators as chronic absence, past retentions, suspensions, and course failure in English and/or math. Research has shown that use of this middle school early warning system accurately predicted non-graduation from high school.^{lviii}

Since chronic absenteeism begins in the early years of schooling, an elementary-grades early warning system could help schools mobilize family, school, district, and community supports and interventions in the earliest years. The American Institutes for Research^{lix} has created an early warning rubric specifically for North Carolina that utilizes the *North Carolina Risk Report and Diploma Assessment Report* available in PowerSchool. This tool enables schools and districts to identify and support students at risk of dropping out of high school. Work on an early-grades warning system could be built from this tool.

VI. Promising and Proven Practices to Improve Regular Attendance

Expanding Access to School Health and Mental Health Professionals

Research has shown that the presence of school-based health providers reduces hospitalization rates, decreases the number of absences for children with asthma,^{lx} and can increase attendance.^{lxi} School counselors improve a child's academic, social-emotional, and career skills and abilities. Schools that employ counselors have better school climates and report lower rates of aggressive child behavior and classroom disturbances.^{lxii} This approach is endorsed by the national Campaign for Grade Level Reading.^{lxiii}

Developing Family/School/Community Partnerships

Key program elements in building partnerships to reduce absences include home visits and regular parent contact, attendance incentives, messaging the importance of regular attendance to parents,^{lxiv} and referring chronically absent students to school counselors.^{lxv} These low- to no-cost interventions can improve school-parent relationships and encourage more regular attendance. They may also improve parent-child relationships.^{lxvi}

Localities that have developed cross-sector and multi-agency partnerships to reduce chronic absenteeism include New York City, D.C., and New Britain, Connecticut.

- New York City's Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and School Engagement has a "School Every Day" campaign with comprehensive strategies, data, and resources to increase attendance.
- In D.C., the Truancy Taskforce, the Graduation Pathways Project, and the Youth Re-Engagement Center are collaborations that provide comprehensive supports for chronically absent students.^{lxvii}
- New Britain, CT has been widely lauded for its holistic and concerted efforts to improve school attendance, climate, discipline, and performance. The district employed a multi-pronged strategy that included teacher and administrative professional development to engage with data, school attendance action teams to regularly monitor and review data for appropriate intervention, increased parent engagement, communications, and home visits, and community partnerships to avoid juvenile court referrals. Through these efforts, the district saw a reduction in kindergarten chronic absence (30 percent to 18 percent) and a nine percent increase in kindergarten grade-level reading in the 2012-2013 school year.^{lxviii}

Implementing Research-Based Messaging with Parents

In Class Today is an example of a program of communication with parents of at-risk students shown to be effective in reducing chronic absenteeism. The intervention reduced student absences comparably across all grade levels, including absences among participating students' siblings.^{lxix} Similar materials and tools are available from national initiatives including Attendance Works, the Campaign for Grade Level Reading and Every Student, Every Day.

Establishing a School Climate Improvement Process

Guided by the National Center on School Climate's approach (excerpted below), a framework could include:

- **A shared vision and a plan** for promoting, enhancing, and sustaining a positive school climate
- **Policies** that specifically promote a sustainable climate of social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual skills, knowledge, dispositions and engagement, supported by a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students
- **Prioritized practices** that support holistic development of students, enhance engagement in teaching and learning, address barriers and develop a sustainable infrastructure
- **A welcoming school environment** where all members feel safe and are supported
- **Social and civic justice** demonstrated through practices, activities and norms^{lxx}

Providing Wraparound Supports to Meet Family and Community Need

Individual schools have seen improvements in regular school attendance by using a “community school” model to reduce the impacts of living with low-income for the families in their schools. Schools have built themselves into community hubs, providing essential services or supports, like food pantries, laundry services, tax return prep, or adult ESL classes, to bring parents into the school building more often and improve the parent-school relationship. As a result, many of these schools have seen upticks in school attendance.^{lxxi} These efforts require schools or districts to be intentional about understanding community service gaps and parent and child needs.

While wraparound community supports are not an evidence-based strategy to improve attendance, these small but meaningful adjustments and investments individual schools have made help to better serve parents and make the school a useful resource for them.^{lxxii}

Note from a School Principal. “You can’t underestimate the power of making school a positive place. Schools that have strong, engaging teachers; that are connected to the community; and that offer a litany of before, after, and during school activities often have higher attendance rates.”^{lxxiii}

VII. Evidence-based and Promising Programs and Capacity-Building Opportunities to Improve Regular Attendance

A meta-analysis of truancy studies, conducted in 2009 and updated in 2012, reveals that “the literature on truancy is voluminous and disparate.”^{lxxiv} In this review, just 16 studies met criteria for inclusion, suggesting that many programs currently operate without a strong evaluation results. Across these studies, the meta-analysis reveals a statistically significant but moderate level of impact—in general, reducing chronic absence by about five days a year. “More studies are needed to examine the effects of various interventions, including differential effects of different types of interventions in different settings that may account for why some collaborative interventions are successful while others are not.”^{lxxv}

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Response to Intervention is a multi-tiered approach to behavior, supporting students with emotional or learning needs. It incorporates tiered instruction, family engagement, and ongoing monitoring of student data and has an extensive literature base of support.^{lxxvi}

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

PBIS is a framework for organizing evidence-based behavioral interventions to improve academic and behavior outcomes for all students by taking a positive approach to discipline and behavior. Like Response to Intervention, PBIS uses universal screening, continuous progress monitoring, data-based decision-making, implementation fidelity, and evidence-based interventions.^{lxxvii}

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)

PATHS is a program designed for preschool and elementary school. This program has been shown to improve overall classroom climate, increase child social-emotional skills, and decrease aggressive and disruptive behaviors.^{lxxviii}

The Responsive Classroom Approach (RC)

The Responsive Classroom is an approach to teaching pedagogy that “integrates the social, emotional, and academic needs of children.”^{lxxix} It is designed with best practices to teaching and learning and promotes a joyful and challenging classroom. This approach provides teaching professional development supports and has been shown to improve the social-emotional learning climate in classrooms, student attachment to and engagement with school, and increases in math and reading achievement scores.^{lxxx}

Support Teacher and Administrator Development

Address teacher implicit bias through pre-service training and ongoing professional development. Train teachers in cultural competencies and provide ongoing professional development for teachers and administrators on consistent, clear, and culturally appropriate discipline practices.^{lxxxi} Train school administrators and teachers to monitor and track attendance data with continuous quality improvement testing cycles (i.e. Plan, Do, Study, Act). Building school-level capacity to understand and use data to identify and target resources is critical.^{lxxxii}

Appendix A. The Data Quality Campaign

The Data Quality Campaign is a national effort to help everyone understand and use education data to help students achieve classroom, school and life success. The Campaign notes that using data besides just test scores—such as attendance data—can help ensure that students stay on track all year long, and give parents and school staff early warning if students start to slip.^{lxxxiii}

The Campaign was established in 2009 and now regularly tracks progress on *10 State Actions to Ensure Effective Data*. The most current state-by-state progress report, assembled by surveying each state, was published based on 2014 information.

The ten state actions are:

1. Link state K–12 data systems with early learning, postsecondary, workforce, and other critical state agency data systems.
2. Create stable, sustained support for longitudinal data systems.
3. Develop governance structures to guide data collection and use.
4. Build state data repositories.
5. Provide timely, role-based access to data.
6. Create progress reports with student-level data for educators, students, and parents.
7. Create reports with longitudinal statistics to guide systems-level change.
8. Develop a purposeful research agenda.
9. Implement policies and promote practices to build educators' capacity to use data.
10. Promote strategies to raise awareness of available data.^{lxxxiv}

As of 2014, three states—Arkansas, Delaware and Kentucky—have met all 10 data action benchmarks. Sixteen states and the District of Columbia have accomplished eight or nine of the state actions. North Carolina has met seven.

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