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EDUCATION

DOGE abruptly cut a program for teens with disabilities. This student is 'devastated'

APRIL 14, 2025 · 5:00 AM ET

HEARD ON MORNING EDITION



Cory Turner

6-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST

TRANSCRIPT



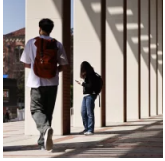
Logan, 17 and a junior at Newton South High School, stands in his room in Newton, Mass. Logan was part of a program called Charting My Path, which helps students with disabilities prepare for life after high school. The Trump administration cancelled the program in February.

Cassandra Klos for NPR

If you visit the [website](#) for Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), you'll find a "Wall of Receipts" listing more than 7,000 federal contracts it has terminated.

Little detail is provided, besides the "savings" from each cancellation, and it's hard to determine the cost or collateral damage of all these cuts. But for some families, there *has* been a cost.

One of these programs, [cancelled on Feb. 10](#), was called Charting My Path for Future Success. It was a research-based effort to help students with disabilities make the sometimes difficult transition from high school into college or the world of work and self-sufficiency.



EDUCATION

Trump says Education Department will no longer oversee student loans, 'special needs'

For just three weeks, beginning in January, some 1,600 high school juniors were enrolled in the program in 13 school districts across the country, including in Virginia, Arizona and Georgia.

A U.S. Education Department spokesperson, Madi Biedermann, told NPR in a statement that Charting My Path was a research project "with questionable implementation" and that too much of the program's \$43 million cost, by DOGE's accounting, was going to contractors, not kids.

But some of the people closest to the program – families, educators and researchers – say Charting My Path could have helped millions of vulnerable teens.

Jessie Damroth was grateful her 17-year-old son's school district, in Newton, Mass., was helping to pilot the program, until she learned it had been abruptly stopped.

"I cried all day," she says.



Logan sits with his mother, Jessie Damroth, during a telehealth appointment with one of his many

With the right supports, "the sky's the limit"

Damroth's son, Logan, is a junior at Newton South High School. He's tall, broad-shouldered and drinks his morning coffee from a hefty, powder blue mug emblazoned with the word "Imagination" and a favorite face from his childhood: SpongeBob SquarePants.

medical specialists. Logan suffers from a cluster of conditions, including autism, anxiety, ADHD and hypersomnia, which can leave him feeling exhausted even after a long night's sleep.

Cassandra Klos for NPR



EDUCATION

The Education Department is being cut in half. Here's what's being lost

Logan asked that we only use his first name, so that he could speak freely about his experience and his disabilities.

In school, Logan says he loves physics, a course he took as a freshman.

"It just felt fun. I liked the problems. They always interested me," he says. "I just like the idea of physics and quantum physics."

Outside of school, he likes to shoot hoops or play games on a PC he built. The computer's black metal case sits open on his desk, revealing a nest of wires and whirring fans lit an eerie green.

Logan says he wants to go to college and study physics or genetics. Genetics, because Logan, his younger sister and mother all suffer from a host of disorders

caused by a rare variation in their TANC2 gene. Those disorders include autism, anxiety, ADHD, debilitating headaches and hypersomnia, which causes Logan to feel sleepy during the day even after a full night's rest.



A framed photograph of Logan and his sister, Ayden, sits on a table in the entry of the family's home in Newton, Mass.

Cassandra Klos for NPR

"I want to help myself and people like me," Logan says.

But preparing for that future, without extra help, was going to be a challenge. Logan sometimes misses school to attend hard-to-schedule appointments with medical specialists. And when he is in class, he can get so exhausted that he sometimes falls asleep.

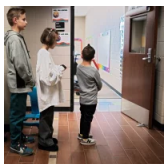
"[Logan] is fully capable of having a wonderful career, a family if he wants. The sky's the limit," says Damroth, adding, "if he has the right supports."

So when Damroth heard about a new research study, called Charting My Path, that offered a host of intensive supports, she quickly enrolled her son. Not long into the program, something began to change in Logan, she says.

He got more excited about school – and the future.

Students led, teachers followed

For students with disabilities, leaving high school can feel like stepping off a cliff, says John Curley, a special educator at Logan's high school who worked on Charting My Path.



EDUCATION

How the Education Department helps students with disabilities get an education

"We try so hard, as best we can, to build a parachute for individuals and families so that it's a little bit of a more graceful fall," Curley says. "That's what I loved about [Charting My Path]."

America's high schools are required by federal law to provide transition planning to students with disabilities who are preparing to graduate. This includes working with school staff to help a student explore and plan for college, career and independence.



Logan sits in his room in his family's home in Newton, Mass. An avid gamer, he built the PC on the desk behind him. Logan asked that we only use his first name, so that he could speak freely about his experience and his disabilities.

Cassandra Klos for NPR

Karrie Shogren, a researcher behind Charting My Path and a professor of special education at the University of Kansas, says schools are still hungry to know, when it comes to transition planning, "what works *best*" and gives students, schools and taxpayers the biggest return on investment.

That was the goal of Charting My Path. As part of the study, 1,600 high school juniors with disabilities were divided into three groups.

A control group simply received the districts' pre-existing transition supports – the basic help required by federal law.

The second group received those basic supports *plus* they attended a Charting My Path class with its own research-based curriculum a few times a week.

There, they talked about their interests and ambitions and worked in small groups on goal-setting with a specially-trained instructor who would also check in occasionally with students' families. The federal contract paid for these extra staff.



EDUCATION

How the Education Department cuts could hurt low-income and rural schools

John Curley, the special educator in Newton, says the message of Charting My Path really appealed to students. Usually, in school, it's teachers telling teens what to do, he says; in Charting My Path, students led, the adults followed.

The third group received the most support: All of the services of the first and second groups as well as one-on-one mentoring for the remainder of their junior *and* senior years, plus even more frequent family check-ins. Logan was in this group.

What's more, while the services would last until graduation, the Charting My Path study would have collected data until at least 2028, to see if the interventions had a lasting impact.

Stepping stones to post-school independence

Charting My Path was built on research that shows students with disabilities who get quality transition services "are more likely to be employed after high school. They're more likely to be enrolled in post-secondary education, and they're more likely to identify that they have a higher quality of life," says Catherine Fowler, a special education researcher at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who has been involved with Charting My Path since 2019, when the contract began.

At the heart of Charting My Path was one of the most promising, research-based services: building students' self-determination skills by working with them to set goals, then helping create concrete plans to achieve them.

A PowerPoint presentation created by one of the Charting My Path districts after the program's termination (and shared with NPR) shows the striking range of



student goals.

A scheduling card for medical appointments appears among vacation magnets on Logan's family fridge.

Cassandra Klos for NPR

"I will get my application and documents submitted for welding school," one student pledged.

Another: "To become a chef and work on a food truck with Dad."

For students with more severe disabilities, some goals may seem less ambitious – like learning to "wash, dry and fold my laundry" or use "the microwave with help from my teacher to make frozen chicken nuggets" – but are still stepping stones on the path to post-school independence.

"I had never seen my high schooler so interested in her future"

Though the federal contract of Charting My Path began back in 2019, its rollout to students was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic and didn't happen until mid-

January of this year. That's when Logan began meeting multiple times a week with his Charting My Path teacher/mentor. "A kind dude," Logan says.



EDUCATION

A guide to what the U.S. Education Department does (and doesn't) do

During those first few classes, Logan says, Charting My Path was "helping me with what I wanted to do later in my life. They were helping me find what degree I personally wanted. And we were going to tour some colleges eventually."

Logan told his teacher about his interest in physics and genetics, and they talked about eventually exploring which colleges might allow him to pursue those interests while also accommodating his disabilities.

John Curley, the transition specialist at Logan's high school, says the years of work and research that went into Charting My Path led to "some of the best materials I've seen in my years of doing this work, and I thought it was a no-brainer for our school and our students and families."

It's impossible to assess the program's effectiveness based on those early weeks. But, after just a few sessions, Logan's mom, Jessie Damroth, was impressed enough by what she saw that she wrote Logan's instructor/mentor a quick email, thanking him.

"Logan was just so excited," Damroth remembers. "I picked him up [from school], and he was talking about maybe he'd be a professor. Maybe he could teach... And that is a light in this kid's eyes that I hadn't seen."



Jessie Damroth poses for a family photo with her daughter Ayden, her son Logan and Logan's dog, Miller. The family adopted Miller to help Logan, and Damroth often calls the cocker spaniel her "chubby cherub."

Cassandra Klos for NPR

Another Newton parent, Janelle Phillips, says her daughter, Emily, "was so very excited and motivated about [Charting My Path]."

Phillips says Emily, like Logan, had only been getting services for a few weeks when the program was stopped but "it was amazing, and I had never seen my high schooler so interested in her future."

Curley saw the same.

"I was really overwhelmed with how quickly students responded to these interventions and how devastated they were when it was abruptly taken away."

Logan used the same word, "devastated," to describe how he felt. "It hurt a lot because that was the support I needed and now it's just gone."

After years of researchers and educators developing Charting My Path – and just three weeks after students like Logan began the process – DOGE terminated the study on Feb. 10.

Damroth shared an email with NPR that Logan's teacher sent his students soon after the program was shut down:

"I was inspired by your goals and dreams. I want you to know that I believe in you and hope that even if we are not meeting as a class, that you continue to work on achieving your dreams."

Logan's district, Newton Public Schools, declined to participate in this story.

Damroth has been public about her grief and anger, posting on social media and [giving interviews](#). She tells NPR, "To have that door opened, it's really hard to all of a sudden slam it and that's it. There is no transition time. There's no closure for those kids."



Calculating the loss

From the start, DOGE's mandate has been to root out waste, fraud and abuse in government spending. In a [March interview](#), Musk said "the sheer amount of waste and fraud in the government, it is astonishing – it's mind blowing."

Logan works on his geometry homework before a home-based tutoring session.

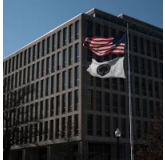
Cassandra Klos for NPR

In a statement to NPR, Education Department spokesperson Madi Biedermann said Charting My Path was cancelled after a review found that "over 50% of the contract was going to vendor overhead" and revealed "a questionable \$600,000 payment for the main contractor to provide consulting services to a low performing subcontractor."

The primary vendor on the Charting My Path contract – the American Institutes for Research (AIR), a nonpartisan, nonprofit research group – said in a statement to NPR that, prior to the Feb. 10 termination, "the Department of Education repeatedly affirmed to the AIR team that we were doing an excellent job implementing the study under this contract."

As for the department's contention that federal dollars were being wasted, AIR added: "The rates that AIR charged in this contract—including overhead costs—were negotiated in advance with the Department of Education and AIR fully adhered to those rates."

While the department insists the program was cancelled after a review, it did not respond to a request to share that review with NPR.



EDUCATION

Trump administration targets Education Department research arm in latest cuts

The official termination record posted on the DOGE site is dated just three weeks after Donald Trump's inauguration. And on that same day, Feb. 10, DOGE cancelled not just Charting My Path but 88 other Education Department contracts, gutting the department's research division.

There's also disagreement about just how much money was saved by cancelling the program.

According to DOGE's "Wall of Receipts," the Charting My Path contract was worth about \$43 million and only about \$5 million had been spent, creating a "savings" of roughly \$38 million.

But those closest to Charting My Path, who would not speak publicly for fear of retribution, say the total contract value was over \$45 million and that nearly \$20 million – not \$5 million – had been spent on research, instructor salaries and more *before* the contract was terminated.

The Trump administration did not respond to a request to explain its accounting.

Researchers and educators will never know how effective Charting My Path might have been.

Based on the early results he saw in Newton, John Curley says he was hopeful and calls the decision to cut Charting My Path "a huge mistake. I think investing in students with disabilities is investing in all of us because they're part of our community, right? They're our brothers and sisters, our kids, our neighbors, our coworkers."



Logan heads to school, sometimes by bus and sometimes driven by his mother.

Cassandra Klos for NPR

Logan doesn't like to talk about the program's sudden end, because he still doesn't understand why it was cut. Since the program closed, he hasn't seen his instructor/mentor, who was moved to a different school so the district could take on his salary and continue his employment in a different role.

"I feel angry," Logan says. "But I've also seen people who need this more than me be affected worse, and it's just heartbreaking to see."

The PowerPoint shared with NPR highlights one such story.

In it, a Charting My Path teacher wrote, "A student with autism found it very difficult to express his opinions and personal thoughts. Often he said, 'I just don't want [to] tell you personal things' and would show frustration."

But when the program was cancelled and the teacher asked the student if he was glad he wouldn't have to participate anymore, the student said, "No, I was learning things."

trump's presidential transition doge u.s. education department students with disabilities
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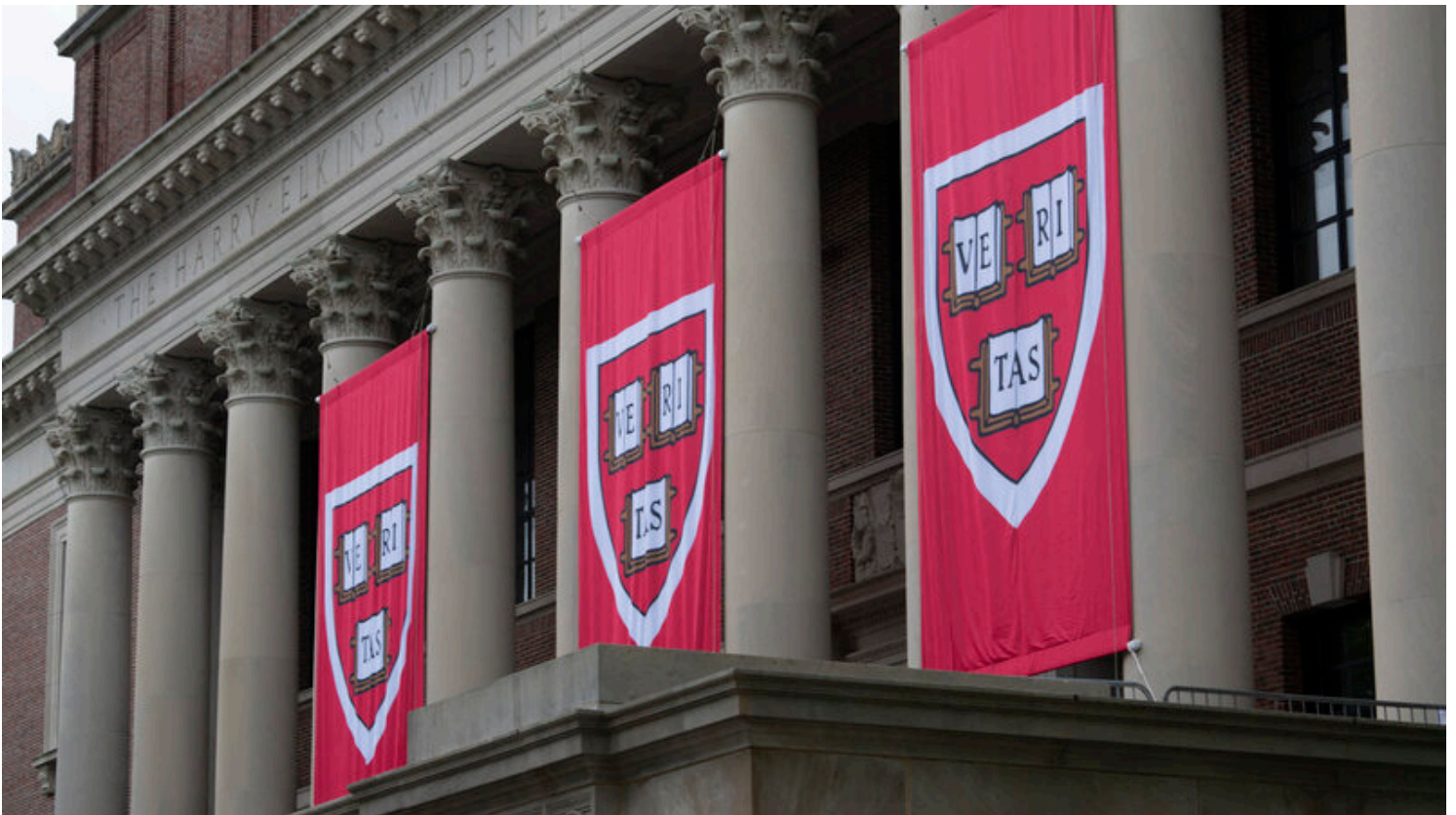
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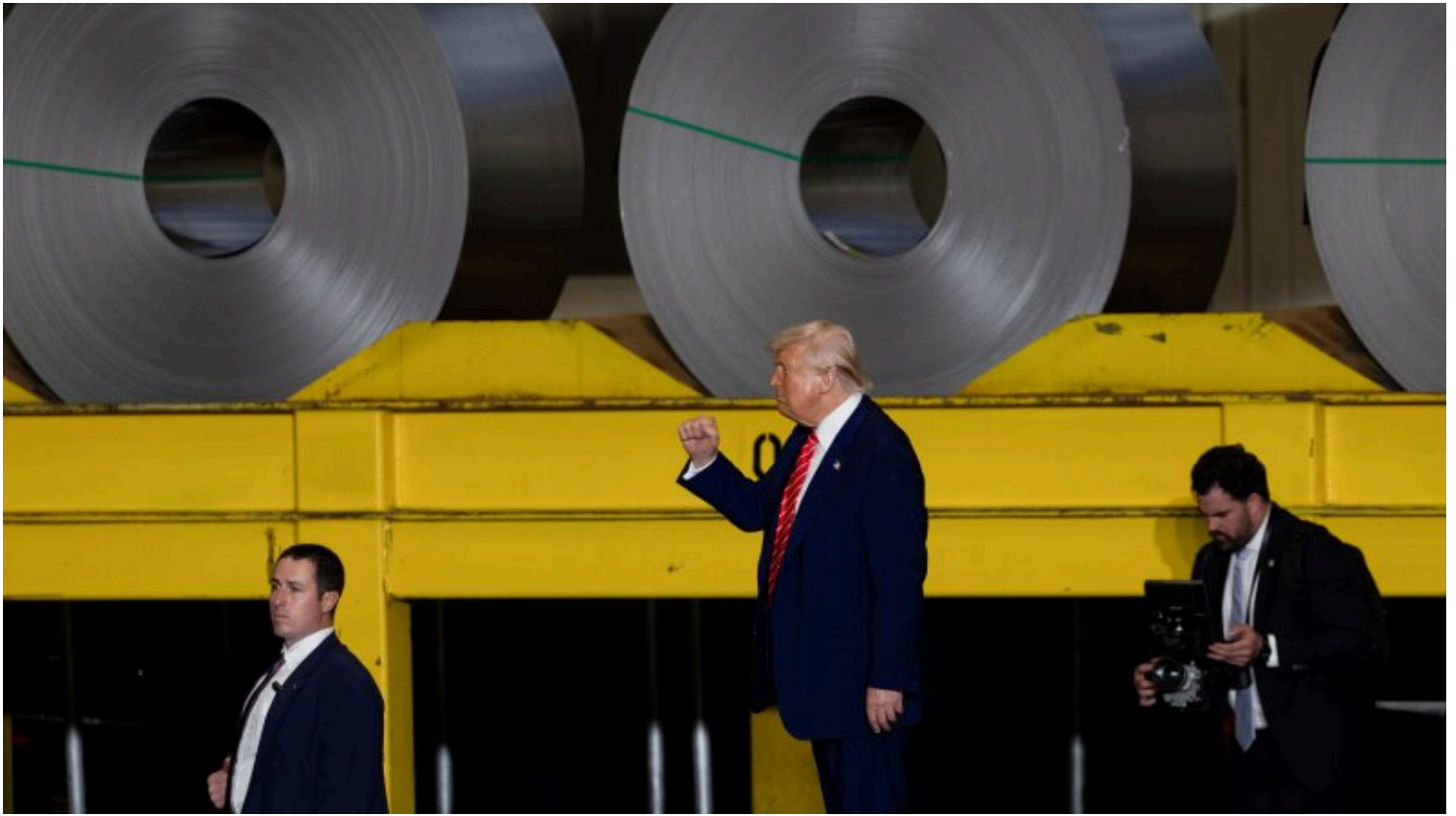
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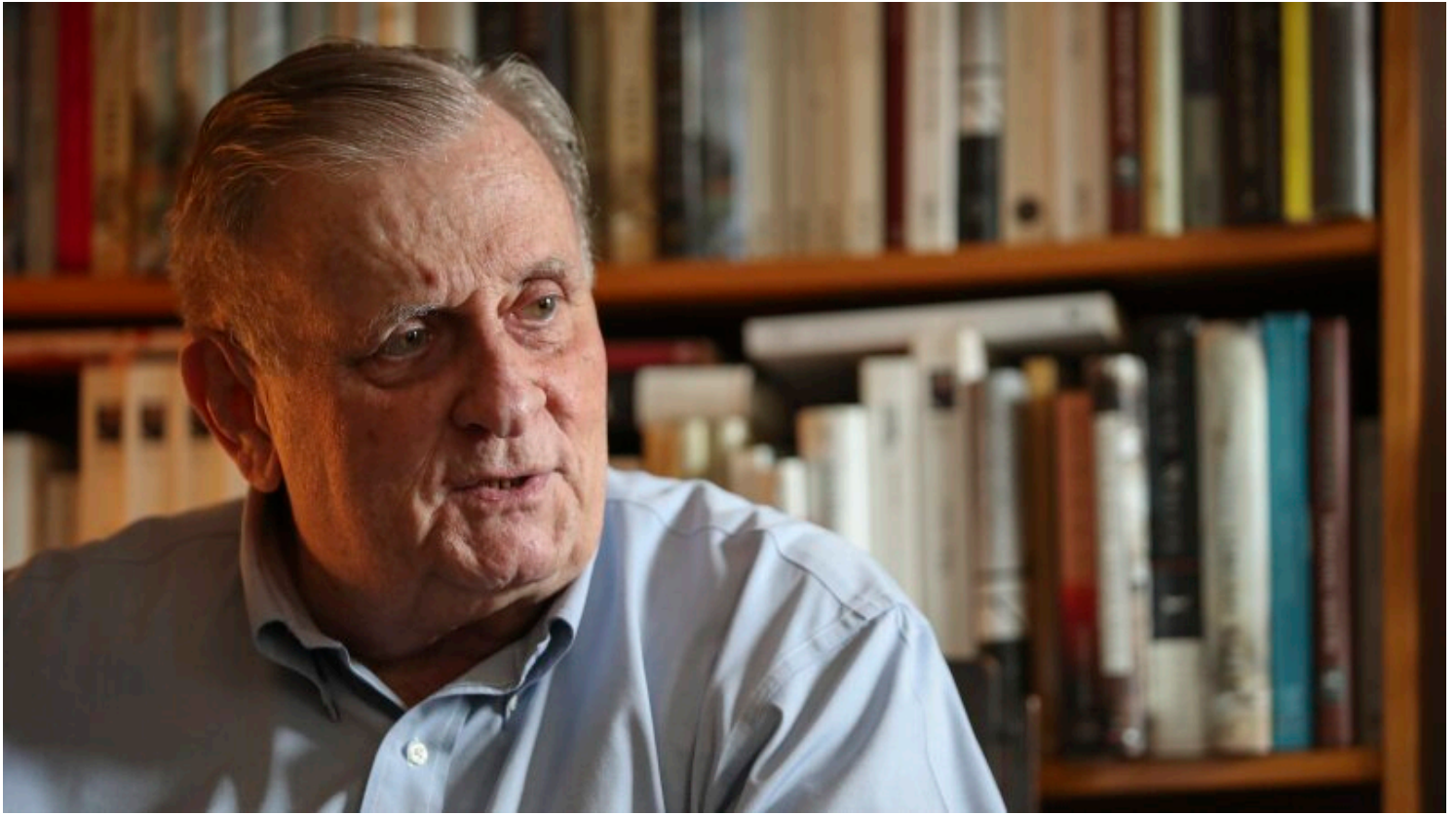
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