

Addressing School Closures and Consolidations

A Guide for Safe Routes to School Practitioners



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The Safe Routes Partnership is a catalyst for the creation of safe, active, equitable, and healthy communities—urban, suburban, and rural—throughout the United States. Founded in 2005, the Safe Routes Partnership advances safe walking and bicycling to and from schools, to improve the health and well-being of kids of all races, income levels, and abilities, and to foster the creation of healthy communities for everyone.

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1. Introduction

School consolidation is the action of closing schools and merging student attendance into larger and fewer schools. Consolidations have been a growing trend throughout the United States for almost 100 years. Examples include eliminating the single-room schoolhouse model and evolving into larger schools in more rural parts of the country, school desegregation where Black students were being moved into integrated schools and were bussed longer distances from home, and consolidating schools in urban centers when populations shifted to more suburban areas.

School consolidation is largely fueled by school district interests to create efficiencies, but can come at the cost of students, families, and the community. These costs include impacts to student learning, youth development, social connectedness, and transportation access.¹ Student transportation is affected by, but is not always fully considered in the planning for and implementation of school consolidations. Closure and consolidation mean students from at least one school have to travel

further to and from school. The additional costs are either borne by an already cash-strapped school district by providing more busing, or the burden falls on families and caregivers. This involves either paying for additional public transportation, or driving children to school, if they even own a vehicle. The community where the consolidation occurs is likely to face increased congestion from more families and caregivers driving students to and from school. Students able to walk and bicycle are likely traveling on routes with new safety concerns. If done without proper planning and coordination, a school consolidation can undo the hard work that a Safe Routes to School program has done to make it safe, convenient, and fun for children to walk and roll to and from school.

If the school district you work with is considering school consolidation or the process is already underway, this resource is for you. This guide provides an overview of recommendations for Safe Routes to School practitioners (and others working on student transportation issues) before, during, and after school closures and consolidations.

Section 2. Proactively Addressing Transportation Challenges describes strategies and considerations if you are engaged early in the process – when or even before consolidation is being contemplated.

Section 3. Strategies to Implement When Schools Consolidate describes ideas and tools you can use once the decision to close and consolidate schools has happened. This section is organized by the familiar 6 Es of Safe Routes to School (Engagement, Engineering, Education, Encouragement, Evaluation, and Equity). This guide was informed by experiences of two Safe Routes to School programs in California - San Jose and Cupertino, as well as other communities experiencing school consolidation around the country. Examples of materials and resources that can be adapted for your community are referenced throughout.

A NOTE TO SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS

This guide is not just for Safe Routes to School practitioners. It can also be used by school district transportation professionals, administrators, or community champions looking to address student transportation issues. We encourage you to also connect with your local Safe Routes to School lead. If they are not housed within the school district, they can often be found within the local municipal transportation department, health department, or community organization working on walking, rolling, and active living.

2. Proactively Addressing Transportation Challenges

The location of schools is one of the most important decisions a community will make.² Due to many factors, including the high cost and availability of land, schools are increasingly being built on the periphery of communities.³ For students to be able to walk or bike to school, it is essential that schools be located relatively near to where students live. Over the past fifty years, schools around the country have increasingly been built on the outskirts of communities, too far from children's homes for walking or biking to be practical. In 1969, 45 percent of elementary school children lived a mile or less from school, and almost 90 percent of those children walked or biked to school. Decades later, only 24 percent lived within a mile of school.^{4,5} Distance from school is often the biggest barrier to walking to school, resulting in reliance on private cars, especially when buses are not available.

Unfortunately, many times conversations about how student transportation will be affected do not happen until after the decision to close and consolidate schools has been made. However, there are opportunities to proactively address challenges through school siting policies and guidance long before conversations around consolidation start, and families and community members should be engaged early on.



A. ADOPT SMART SCHOOL SITING POLICIES

School districts can adopt school siting policies that ensure they consider overall land use patterns, walkability and proximity of schools to residences, and areas that pose hazards for students' health and well-being when evaluating new school sites, considering school closures, and thinking about consolidation. Having these policies in place help ensure Safe Routes to School are considered from the start and can help avoid detrimental impacts to student transportation.

Model School Siting Policies

ChangeLab Solutions has a set of [six inter-related model school board policies](#) that spell out best practices for district policies and decision-making on school siting.⁷ The model policies can be integrated into existing facilities and other board policy areas that advance smart school siting, and address the following:

- School Siting Overview Policy
- Long-Term Coordinated Planning
- Procedures for School Site Planning
- Considerations for School Siting Determinations
- Site Design
- General Guidelines for Attendance Zones & Assignment Policies

US EPA's [Smart School Siting Tool](#) can help communities align school site selection with planning policies and capital investments, understand how school siting and other community planning processes are coordinated, and compare school siting options. Using this tool ensures that transportation is considered in school siting and consolidation decision-making.

Including school siting in a city's comprehensive plan can also provide a framework for ensuring a public process and considering a wider range of factors.⁸

ADDITIONAL READINGS AND RESOURCES ON SCHOOL SITING

- [Why Johnny Can't Walk to School](#) – National Trust for Historic Preservation
- [Smart Growth and School Siting](#) and [Smart School Siting Tool](#) – US EPA
- [Smart School Siting](#) – ChangeLab Solutions



B. ENGAGE COMMUNITY MEMBERS EARLY

While school closure and consolidation decisions are made within the public realm through school district board and administration meetings, the vast majority of community members are not aware of when these discussions are happening and how to be involved. Decisions about school consolidation are often made at least the school year prior to implementation, and many times school consolidation is a longer process spanning more than a year. As a Safe Routes to School practitioner, you may have advance notice. If so, engage families, students, and other community members. Help facilitate opportunities to solicit community input to inform decisions, or let community members know what meetings to attend and how to participate. Target engagement efforts towards community members who experience barriers to participation and are often most impacted by school consolidations, including low-income families, communities of color, single parents, and disabled individuals.



3. Strategies to Implement When Schools Close and Consolidate

Once the decision to close and consolidate schools has happened, there are several strategies that Safe Routes to School practitioners can use in the planning for, during, and following the changes. While the local dynamics will vary, school consolidations are likely to result in two things: 1) some students will be attending schools further from their homes, and 2) some students will be taking different routes to school. These new conditions will make them less able or likely to walk or roll to school. The good thing is there are many strategies in the familiar Safe Routes to School toolbox that can be used to address this. This section is organized by the 6 E's of Safe Routes to School (Engagement, Engineering, Education, Encouragement, Evaluation, and Equity). Ensuring students are able and encouraged to safely walk and roll to school when schools consolidate will likely require implementing a variety of strategies, pulling from multiple E's. As always, we recommend every effort incorporate meaningful Engagement and be centered on Equity. Strategies from the other E's should be tailored to fit the specific community needs and environment.

A. ENGAGEMENT

Listening to students, families, teachers, and school leaders and working with existing community organizations, and building intentional, ongoing engagement opportunities into the program structure.

- **Continue Engagement and Communications Early and Consistently**

Engagement will continue to be an important foundation for Safe Routes to School efforts throughout a school consolidation. Recognize that school consolidation can be a large upheaval for students and families. Often times, the Safe Routes to School team is already working directly with these students and families and can be friendly and helpful faces as everyone navigate new conditions.

Consider expanding engagement opportunities in the affected neighborhoods or through community venues outside of school since school consolidation planning likely to happen during school breaks and implemented at the start of the school year. Participate in any engagement activities the school district is planning (or encourage them to have some) in order to have transportation considered. [Let's Get Together: A Guide for Engaging Communities and Creating Change](#) is a resource with helpful tips and strategies for engaging communities.

Key Partners

- School district transportation staff
- School principal/administrators from all schools affected
- Parent or caregiver leaders- PTA/PTO
- Crossing Guards or School Safety Patrols
- Municipal transportation, engineering, or public works department
- Out-of-school time program providers and student destinations near affected schools
- Transit providers

When and What to Communicate

Ongoing and consistent communications with families can help address transportation challenges before they arise, alleviate concerns, and make changes as smooth as possible. Based on the experiences of local Safe Routes to School programs, here are suggestions for communicating with families at different stages of the school consolidation process:

Before School Consolidation Decisions Are Made

- Let families know that discussions are underway and how they can participate.
- Let families know what partners are working on assessing student transportation and, again, how they can provide input.

When the Decision to Consolidate is Made and During Planning

- Include preliminary information about student transportation impacts in communications about the consolidation from the school district. If there is a Safe Routes to School program, include information about how it will be involved in the consolidation planning.
- Include opportunities for families to provide input, participate in walk audits, and attend other engagement activities.

When the Consolidation is Implemented

- Include walking and rolling messages in the affected school's communications about student transportation options and arrival/dismissal procedures.
- Share new route maps and information about new programs and other Safe Routes to School activities being offered.
- Offer ideas and suggestions about ways to walk and roll to school for students and families new to the campus (i.e. promote a remote drop off location).



B. ENGINEERING

Creating physical improvements to streets and neighborhoods that make walking and bicycling safer, more comfortable, and more convenient.

- **Assess New Student Routes and Pick-up and Drop-off Areas**

Before the consolidation occurs, conduct a walk audit that covers new routes that students may be walking or biking, or that may have increased traffic of any mode because of changing travel patterns. It is helpful to talk with families that will be new to the school to understand what routes they will likely take. Refer to [Let's Go For A Walk: A Toolkit for Planning and Conducting a Walk Audit](#) for guidance and example walk audit materials. Document challenges, including areas that are particularly congested or uncomfortable, as well as unsafe behaviors. Talk with families, students, bus drivers, and crossing guards and capture their thoughts as well.

Assess the current pick-up and drop-off areas to see where there are already challenges or where you may anticipate challenges with increased students. Worksheets such as [this one](#) from the Virginia Safe Routes to School Program can be used to document observations and input.



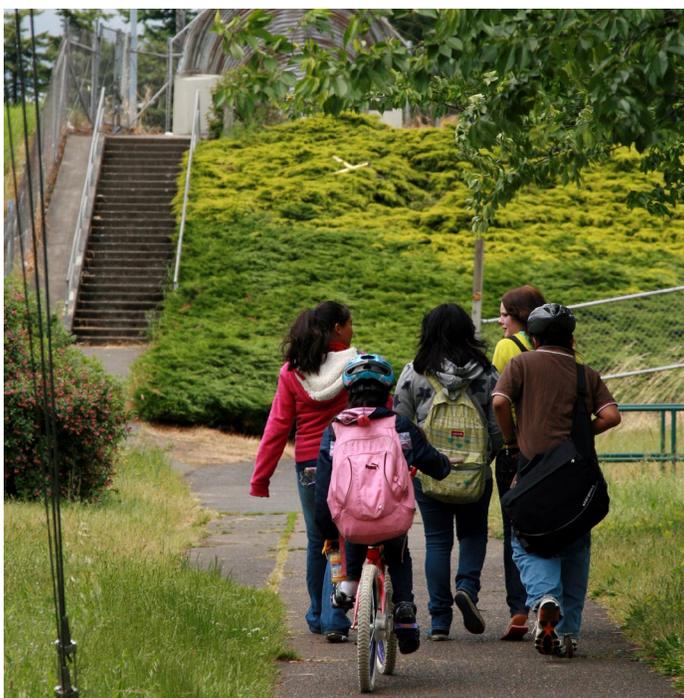
NEW PEDESTRIAN SCRAMBLE IN CUPERTINO

When the Cupertino Union School District came to the City of Cupertino, California's Safe Routes to School team with the news that Regnart Elementary School was closing, they worked together to discuss how to mitigate the expected traffic influx into Lincoln Elementary and ensure safety for student's traveling to school.

Many years prior, the City of Cupertino had conducted walk audits around every school to identify infrastructure improvements to make it safer for student pedestrians and bicyclist. One pinch point identified was the intersection of Bubb Road and McClellan Road, near Lincoln Elementary School. They considered a pedestrian scramble as a possible solution, where it gave people space to cross the street without any vehicles moving through the intersection.

With the anticipation of more student foot traffic during pick-up and drop off times, the previously-identified pedestrian scramble idea quickly made it onto the priority list. The City of Cupertino agreed to adjusted the traffic signals at the intersection to include a pedestrian scramble. Separating vehicular and pedestrian traffic helped make the intersection safer and allowed more vehicles through the intersection during a green light.

To inform families of the new intersection feature, flyers were sent home, and the City of Cupertino created a [video](#) to educate students and parents on how to properly use the intersection before it was fully installed. The City of Cupertino also placed signs on the corners of the intersection for the first couple weeks of the new operation, alerting people walking of the new signal phasing and how to use it.



Intersection of Bubb Road and McClellan Road

HOW TO USE THE PEDESTRIAN SCRAMBLE



A Pedestrian Scramble Traffic Signal Phase is when all traffic signals at an intersection turn red to allow pedestrians to cross any leg of the intersection

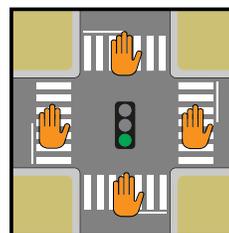
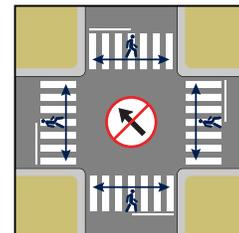
Separating vehicular and pedestrian traffic in this way will make the intersection safer and allow more vehicles through the intersections during a green light



Pedestrians should **ONLY** cross on a walk signal 

Drivers will not be allowed to proceed or turn right on red

Pedestrians should not cross diagonally. The all-walk phase will be long enough to cross two legs of the crosswalk in one light



Pedestrians should **WAIT** on the sidewalk during a vehicle green light and  indication

Drivers may turn right freely during this signal phase



CITY OF CUPERTINO

cupertino.org/saferoutes

- **Prioritize Improvements Around the Affected School Area and Along New School Routes**

Work with partners to identify potential solutions based on the walk audits and observations. Encourage prioritizing and fast-tracking critical improvements so that they are completed before the school year starts. Permanent engineering changes may take longer to implement, but operational, programmatic, and even temporary infrastructure changes using cones or other low-cost materials can often be put into place quickly. [Quick-build projects](#) make improvements using low-cost materials that can be installed quickly and are flexible and designed to be easily changed or even removed if necessary. Most quick-build projects can be constructed in days or weeks and can go from conception to reality within months.



Operations

In addition to long-term engineering changes, operational strategies can help reduce congestion and improve safety at and near a school.

• **Adjust Arrival and Dismissal Times**

With increased student travel and new travel patterns and routes, it is important to assess arrival and dismissal times and the effects around the school campuses. Also consider the traffic patterns of nearby schools that may be impacting each other. Consider staggering arrival and dismissal times (either within a school or between nearby schools) to reduce the amount of congestion at and around the school during peak times. Arrival and dismissal times can be staggered by grade to reduce the number of families dropping off and picking up at once. Dismissal times can also be staggered by mode of travel to reduce conflicts between the different modes. If you are staggering dismissal by mode of travel, walkers and bicyclists should always be dismissed first as to not discourage walking and biking.

• **Increase or Move Crossing Guards**

When assessing where new student travel routes will be, or where there will be increased traffic, be sure to consider the placement of crossing guards. Are crossing guards needed in new locations? Are the existing crossing guards able to manage increased traffic? If crossing guards are placed based on a larger city or district-wide assessment process, ensure that the expected student population changes are factored in so that the appropriate number of crossing guards are placed prior to the start of the school year.

Dismissal Procedures

| | |
|----------------------------|------------------|
| Front Cross Walk Closed : | 3:47 pm- 3:55 pm |
| until further notice | |
| Staggered Dismissal Times: | Walkers 3:40 pm |
| / Car Riders | 3:45 pm |
| Playground Closed: | 3:40-4:00 pm |

Walkers, Bikers, Parents Walking to Pick up Students

- Dismissal at 3:40 pm MTRF 2:10 pm on Wednesday
- Exit from the Kindergarten Door, North side of building-no front door dismissal



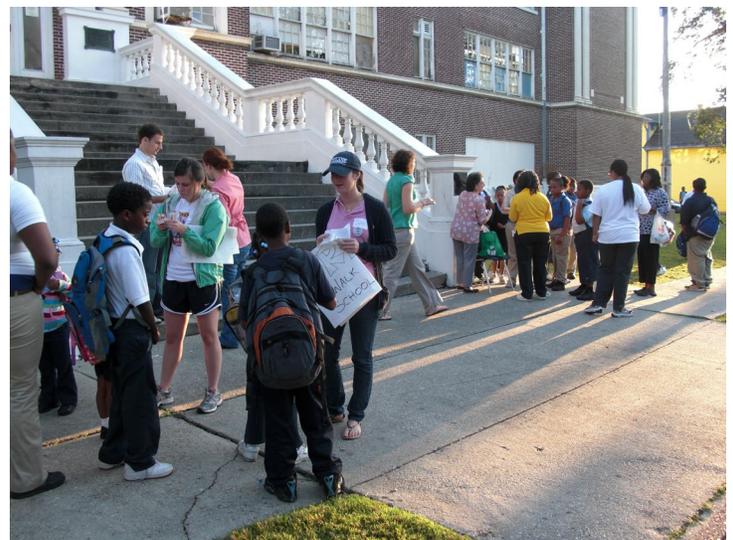
Car Riders

- Dismissal at 3:45 pm
- Exit from the **Front Door**
- Stand in grade level designated area on blue line on main sidewalk-Kdg. will stand in front of the kdg. doors.
- Students with siblings- older students will stand with youngest sibling
- All students should enter and exit their car curb side-they should not exit street side and parents should stay inside the vehicle

Bus Riders & Boys and Girl Club

- Dismissal from club

Example of a staggered dismissal schedule.



C. EDUCATION

Providing students and the community with the skills to walk and bicycle safely, educating them about benefits of walking and bicycling, and teaching them about the broad range of transportation choices.

- **Create New Route Maps (Walk and Roll Maps)**

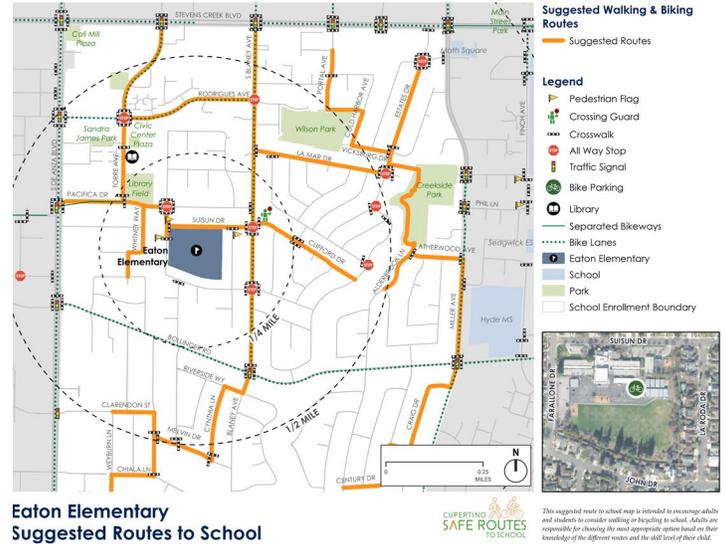
Use your understanding of where students will be traveling from, where improvements will be made before school starts, and your assessment of the routes to create new suggested routes to school or walk and roll maps. Having these updated maps can help families understand their options that include walking and rolling to their new campus. Encourage the school to develop and communicate arrival and dismissal procedures including on campus and remote drop-off/pick-up areas to current and new families.

- **Driver Awareness**

With increased students walking and rolling to school, it is important to alert drivers and provide education to families, neighbors, and other drivers in the community to remind them to yield to pedestrians, to follow the posted speed limits, and watch out for students. With new student travel patterns, the school zone may change or increase and that information should be communicated to drivers in the area.

- **Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Education**

With increased students walking and rolling to school, it is important to alert drivers and provide education to families, neighbors, and other drivers in the community to remind them to yield to pedestrians, to follow the posted speed limits, and watch out for students. With new student travel patterns, the school zone may change or increase and that information should be communicated to drivers in the area.



Example of signage to increase driver awareness near schools.

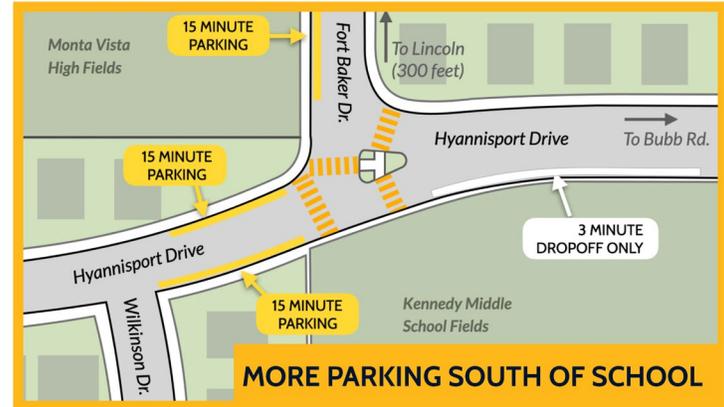
D. ENCOURAGEMENT

Generating enthusiasm and increased walking and bicycling for students through events, activities, and programs.

- ### Walking School Buses and Bike Trains

Creating group walking and bicycling opportunities for students can enable students to travel on foot or by bike to their new schools, either from their homes or from remote drop-off locations. A walking school bus is a way for children to travel to and from school on foot with adult supervision. It offers a safe, dependable, active way for children to get to school versus being driven in a car. It reduces the number of cars at and around the school, while encouraging students to walk. Each “bus” walks along a set route with one or more adults leading it, picking children up at designated stops along a predetermined route and walking them to school. The process is reversed in the afternoons on the way home from school. Refer to [Step by Step: How to Start a Walking School Bus at Your School](#) for more information.

A [bike train](#) provides a similar program for students bicycling in.

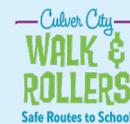


- ### Remote Drop Off

Increased distance from school can limit ability for students to travel the entire trip on foot or by bike. One way to reduce traffic congestion at the school campus is to designate areas away from the campus for parents to drop off and pick up their children. These are also called “walk on in” or “park and walk” programs. In a remote drop off program, children are driven most of the way to school, but are then dropped off a short distance from school – often a quarter mile – so they can walk the remainder of the way. A remote drop off site may be a park, a parking lot, a church, or anywhere else where students can be easily dropped off, can safely congregate, and can follow a relatively safe route to the school. Once children are dropped off, they may be accompanied to school by a school bus driver, teacher, or adult volunteer, or may walk on their own. Some school transportation departments have school buses drop students off at remote drop off sites as well.

Take the 3 Block Challenge!

- Culver City's 3 Block Challenge
- The Culver City Safe Routes to School program encourages students and caregivers to take the 3 Block Challenge by parking and walking three blocks to school. A map helps families find parking areas outside of the three-block radius.



E. EVALUATION

Assessing which approaches are more or less successful, ensuring that programs and initiatives are supporting equitable outcomes, and identifying unintended consequences or opportunities to improve the effectiveness of each approach.

- **Conduct Pre- and Post- Assessments**

In addition to assessing new routes and pick up/drop off locations and procedures prior to the school consolidation, plan on evaluating conditions about a month after school has opened to see if adjustments need to be made. In addition to observations, consider surveying students and families to learn about transportation challenges they are facing. At this point, you may also need to conduct walk/bike/traffic counts in order to have data to support additional infrastructure changes or crossing guards.

F. EQUITY

Ensuring that initiatives are benefiting all demographic groups, with particular attention to ensuring safe, healthy, and fair outcomes for low-income students, students of color, students of all genders, students with disabilities, and others.

School closure and consolidation happens more often in communities of color and low-income communities. Often the students are already at a disadvantage, and these actions result in larger class sizes and what few resources they have are stretched among more students. At the same time, walking and rolling are prevalent among low-income people and people of color – but street conditions are even more dangerous than the walking and rolling conditions experienced by white, middle-class Americans. Safe Routes to School is centered on equity, understanding that the health, access, and community benefits provided by active transportation are crucial for undoing inequitable historical systems and addressing the harm they have done.

Throughout the school consolidation process, champion data collection and assessment that understands the needs of different groups of students. Community members whose primary language is not English or members who have had the least opportunities to influence decisions or are the most adversely affected by decisions should be prioritized in the engagement process. Safe Routes to School practitioners are often strong champions for including community members in decision-making spaces and meetings.

4. Conclusion

School closures and consolidations bring on numerous changes for students, their families, school staff, and the community. Working in a team with school district and school staff, the local transportation department, and parent and caregiver leaders, Safe Routes to School practitioners can provide valuable insight and community connections to address student transportation needs and help make walking and rolling viable travel options.



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