

**TEACHER UNIONISM AND TEACHER
EMPOWERMENT: THE EVIDENCE FROM
ILLINOIS RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the problem of how teacher unionism relates to teacher empowerment within rural Illinois school districts. Specifically, the study attempted to examine which variables describing teacher unions influence the attainment of a core set of conditions for teacher empowerment. Multivariate regression analysis was used to identify the most significant unionism characteristics influencing the likelihood that a rural school district would exhibit a high degree of teacher empowerment. The following were among the findings: 1) union affiliation conferred no advantage for achieving teacher empowerment outcomes, 2) a district's location in northern Illinois was related to teachers' increased feelings of empowerment more so than other demographic or professional variables, and 3) teacher empowerment would appear to be as much a product of perceptions of key actors as actual empowerment provisions bargained into contracts.

With over 80 percent of the nation's public school teachers belonging to either the American Federation of Teachers or the National Education Association, and more than 60 percent covered by a formal collective bargaining agreement, teacher unionism plays a key role in affecting educational policy and practice [1]. However, as Johnson suggested, whether teacher unionism works for or against school effectiveness depends on a number of interrelated factors that are unique to every local school district [2].

Possibly because of this, and in spite of an extensive literature on the topic, our understanding of teacher unionism still remains limited. Research-based inquiries into the nature of teacher unionism have frequently investigated the practice of collective bargaining with particular regard to its economic impact. Yet, teacher unions contend that unionism is a vehicle for the increased professionalization of

their membership. This connection between unionism and professionalism for teachers seems especially relevant today given the smorgasbord of recent educational reform initiatives that have called for changes in the organization of the teaching profession.

Probably no other policy researcher has been a more forceful proponent for the professionalization and empowerment of teaching than Linda Darling-Hammond [3]. In a 1985 piece in the *Teachers College Record*, typical of her work, Darling-Hammond argued that the "most critical issue facing American education today is the professionalization of teaching" [3, p. 205]. Speaking specifically to the subject of empowerment, Darling-Hammond further detailed how teacher professionalism must provide for the control and responsibility of teachers over the education of students, while working to augment the degree to which society values teachers' work through such events as the development of professional standards, peer review, and the improvement of salaries and working conditions [3, p. 214]. A common theme with Darling-Hammond, and one found throughout the literature on teacher professionalism, speaks to the importance of teachers' full accountability for, and ownership of the educational enterprise, and, in short, the autonomy and sense of control that exists for professionals in other fields. An undeniable message is that teacher empowerment is an essential ingredient to strengthening teaching as a profession.

Indeed, both Mertens and Yarger [4] and Maeroff [5] asserted that the first step in the professionalization of teaching must involve empowering teachers with the basic authority and power to practice their teaching in accordance with the accepted standards and knowledge base that pertain to their work. Under this view, while any degree of professional knowledge and standards may be held by teachers, without the power and authority to exercise them, the value of increasing professionalization within teaching would be lost.

Kerchner and Kaufman aptly pointed out that neither schools nor unions can work toward this end without a parallel change in the other:

Unions are utterly incapable of empowering teachers to reorganize schools, to impose and monitor professional standards, or to increase student achievement except by working through the school districts. Likewise, managements are incapable of reorganizing schools, changing their schedules, or altering the duties of employees without also changing the labor relations contracts and work-role definitions of teachers and administrators [6, p. 2].

Though these comments portend continued gains in the empowerment of teachers, those aspects of teacher unionism related to that end have yet to be fully investigated. And, if a set of categorical conditions can be posited wherein teacher unionism contributes to increased teacher empowerment, the question still remains as to whether such conditions hold across a variety of organizational contexts in urban, suburban, and rural school settings.

Rural school districts, in particular, provide one context in which an enshrined condition of local control may divest teachers of that autonomy, authority, and responsibility necessary for empowered teaching. Acknowledging the fact that teacher unionism is a fairly recent development and that professional control of rural schools has increased dramatically, Sher argued that rural education largely remains a community enterprise to an extent unknown in most urban school systems [7]. "Citizen participation" and "community control," now being hailed as contemporary topics in American urban education, are forces readily apparent in school systems in rural areas. As such, the rural school district creates a special case for exploring the relationship between the characteristics of teacher unionism and teacher empowerment. Unfortunately, the knowledge base dealing with even general issues of teacher unionism in rural school districts is weak. The study reported here examined which variables describing teacher unions in rural school districts influence the attainment of necessary conditions for empowerment in teaching.

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

A framework to explore the relationship between characteristics of teacher unionism in rural school districts and conditions of teacher empowerment was based upon the research of McDonnell and Pascal [1] and focused on the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between unionism characteristics of the collective bargaining environment and conditions of teacher empowerment within rural school districts?
2. What is the relationship between characteristics of union affiliation and conditions of teacher empowerment within rural school districts?
3. What is the relationship between demographic characteristics of teacher unions and conditions of teacher empowerment within rural school districts?
4. What is the relationship between professional characteristics of teacher unions and conditions of teacher empowerment within rural school districts?
5. What is the relationship between locational characteristics of teacher unions and conditions of teacher empowerment within rural school districts?

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study employed a two-stage design. In the first stage of the study, a random sample comprised of approximately 18 percent of the local teacher unions in all rural unit school districts in Illinois was chosen. (The definition of a rural school district for the purposes of this study followed that used

by the State of Illinois in its typology of public school districts.) The research in this first stage, in turn, was based on two primary data sources.

The president of each local union selected was asked to complete a survey instrument designed to elicit variable data regarding those characteristics of teacher unions as set forth in the research questions. In that local teacher unions operate within the context of their local school districts, data were also elicited regarding specific environmental characteristics of the rural school districts under study. Other variable data regarding teacher unionism, namely that specifying the average length of teacher service and average teacher salaries for the rural school districts under study, were obtained from various statistical reports completed by the Illinois State Board of Education.

A second survey instrument was then utilized with the local teacher union president, the district superintendent, and selected rank-and-file union member teachers from the elementary, middle, and high school levels to measure the perceived degree of teacher empowerment within each sampled rural school district. Respondents were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement on a four-point scale with survey items as presented in Table 1.

In the second stage of the study, a document analysis of the collective bargaining contract was undertaken for each rural school district's union randomly sampled in the first stage. From these contracts, data were extracted on the degree to which each contract contained up to ten provisions constituting a core set of necessary conditions for teacher empowerment adapted from McDonnell and Pascal [1]. (A listing of these empowerment provisions can be found in Table 3.)

Multivariate regression analysis, estimated by means of ordinary least squares, was used to identify the most significant unionism variables influencing the likelihood that a rural school district would exhibit strong perceptions of teacher empowerment and that a local teacher union would attain each empowered teaching provision in its contract.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions about Teacher Empowerment

There is considerable agreement among union presidents, superintendents, and rank-and-file teachers regarding the degree of teacher empowerment in rural school districts. Table 2 presents the mean scores for the teacher empowerment survey statements for each respondent group along with the analysis of variance results to determine significant differences among the respondents across the different items. The analysis of variance produced few significant differences among the union presidents, superintendents, and teachers in their perceptions of the degree of teacher empowerment. On only four statements were the results of the analysis of variance statistically significant at the .05 level of confidence. Where there was significant disagreement among respondents' perceptions,

Table 1. Empowerment Survey Items

Question No.	Item
1	Teachers in this district are permitted to refuse a teaching assignment outside of a given grade or subject matter area.
2	Teachers in this district are free from having administrators intervene to change their grades.
3	Teachers in this district determine the types of learning experiences that students encounter.
4	Teachers in this district exercise control over the administration of standardized tests to their students.
5	Teachers in this district determine the selection of textbooks and instructional materials.
6	Teachers in this district may limit the number of subjects, grades, or ability groups they must teach.
7	Teachers in this district exercise control over the working conditions they encounter.
8	Teachers in this district influence matters of school policy.
9	Teachers in this district participate in the hiring and assignment of teacher aides.
10	Teachers in this district influence decisions about curriculum and instruction.
11	Teachers in this district influence how various state and federal grant programs are structured and implemented.
12	Teachers in this district exercise control over class size.
13	Teachers in this district influence the school district's mission and goals.
14	Teachers in this district exercise control over the number of classroom interruptions they must deal with.
15	Teachers in this district exercise control over the administrative disposition of student discipline cases.
16	Teachers in this district influence administrative evaluation of teacher performance and effectiveness.
17	Teachers in this district determine the inservice training programs which they attend.

superintendents were consistent in attributing more empowerment to teachers than the union presidents and teachers did to themselves.

The underlying cause for the superintendents imputing more power and authority to teachers over matters of school policy, decisions about curriculum and instruction, and the school district's mission and goals may well rest in the intangible nature of these activities at the district level. That is, there exists no clearcut "recipe" for fulfilling these specific responsibilities that are often carried out on a districtwide basis. Such uncertainty, exacerbated by the imposition of local community values in rural school districts as described by Peshkin [8], may

Table 2. Item Means and ANOVA Results for Empowerment Survey
Items by Respondent Group

Question No.	Union Pres. (n = 41)	Supt. (n = 32)	Elem. (n = 33)	Middle (n = 35)	High (n = 38)	F-ratio
1	2.7727	3.0455	2.8182	3.0455	2.8182	0.4498
2	2.1304	1.8261	2.1304	2.3043	2.0870	0.7275
3	1.7826	1.7826	1.6957	1.5217	2.0000	1.8688
4	2.6087	2.4783	2.1739	2.2609	2.7826	1.8484
5	1.6522	1.7391	1.8261	1.6522	1.6522	0.3229
6	3.1739	2.9565	2.9130	3.2174	3.0870	0.6192
7	2.6522	2.3913	2.8261	2.5652	2.7826	1.5025
8	2.6087	2.0435	2.4783	2.2609	2.3043	2.4881*
9	3.2857	2.7619	3.3810	3.1905	3.2857	2.2862
10	2.000	1.6522	2.1739	1.9130	2.3043	3.1002*
11	2.7619	2.3810	2.9524	2.6667	2.8571	1.8371
12	3.3043	3.0000	3.4348	3.3913	3.2609	1.3955
13	2.4762	1.9048	2.8095	2.4286	2.6190	4.1028*
14	3.0435	2.6957	3.0000	2.9565	3.0435	0.7264
15	3.0455	2.8182	2.7727	3.0000	2.9545	0.6797
16	3.0000	2.4762	2.9524	2.6190	2.6190	1.5829
17	2.6957	1.9130	2.5652	2.3913	2.2174	3.5090*

Notes: Sample means calculated from the logical intercept of all cases.

Survey key: 1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Disagree; 4 = Strongly Disagree.

*Statistically significant at the .05 level of confidence.

lead teachers to believe they have no control over these processes, while superintendents have the added benefit of a districtwide perspective regarding union or teacher involvement in these activities. The fact that rank-and-file teachers registered more disagreement about the level of teacher empowerment in the areas of curriculum and instruction, and mission and goals than the union presidents could suggest that the presidents may share this districtwide perspective to some degree by virtue of their positions and responsibilities.

Trends in Contract Provisions

Contractual items associated with teacher empowerment in rural school districts tend to reflect agreements on working conditions, professional status, and career advancement, rather than on the nature of classroom transactions. Table 3 lists the empowerment provisions along with the percentage of sampled rural school districts and unions that had achieved each item in their contracts. The items that appeared in the largest number of contracts deal with those matters as mandating teacher evaluation procedures and practices in some form (67.44%), allowing teachers to determine which inservice programs they will attend (44.19%), and

Table 3. Attainment of Empowered Teaching
Contract Provisions

Provision No.	Contract Provision	Percentage of Districts/ Unions Attaining
1	Teachers can refuse assignment outside of grade or subject area in certain situations.	41.86
2	Administrators cannot intervene to change teachers' grades.	4.65
3	Controls on administration of standardized tests to students.	0.00
4	Limits on the number of subjects, sections, grades, or ability groups teacher must teach.	20.93
5	Establishes organization or policy structure for teachers to address school district policy matters.	23.26
6	Establishes instructional policy committee for each school.	4.65
7	Mandates teacher evaluation procedures and practices.	67.44
8	Teachers can determine inservice training programs they attend.	44.19
9	Mandates class size.	6.98
10	Controls on number of classroom interruptions.	2.33

permitting teachers to refuse a teaching assignment (41.86%). The empowerment items attained in the contracts of less than 10 percent of the rural districts deal directly with classroom instructional variables mandating class size (6.98%), preventing administrators from changing grades (4.65%), establishing instructional policy committees (4.65%), and controlling the number of classroom interruptions (2.33%).

As opposed to those provisions that deal directly with issues of classroom instruction, the top five empowerment items seen in contracts can seemingly be ensured through appropriate administrative and organizational arrangements instituted before a teacher even sets foot in a classroom. These working conditions provisions may in fact serve as the bureaucratic buffers to protect teachers when their values clash with rural community norms and expectations.

In scrutinizing the attainment of empowerment provisions in contracts, however, two caveats should be kept in mind. While the attainment of empowerment items may suggest relative priorities attached to those provisions by teacher unions in rural school districts, it may rather be that the ordering considered in Table 3 reflects divergent levels of resistance by school boards and administrators to the provisions. For instance, though the provision was not seen in even one contract examined for this investigation, contractual language governing the administration of standardized tests may have in reality been a high priority of the sampled teacher unions that never made it off the bargaining table because school boards vehemently and consistently opposed it.

Secondly, situations unique to individual districts play a strong role in determining who gets what at the local level, even if state or national union affiliates choose different strategies, positions, or priorities. The provision prohibiting the changing of teachers' grades, as another example, could take on extreme significance in a single district where teachers found themselves repeatedly confronted with just such a circumstance.

EXPLAINING EMPOWERMENT OUTCOMES

Unearthing the relationships between the various unionism characteristics and perceptions about teacher empowerment and the attainment of empowerment provisions in contracts lies at the heart of answering the research questions posed. Table 4 provides a summary of the significant positive relationships that hold at the .05 level of confidence or better between the explanatory variables that describe characteristics of teacher unionism and the empowerment survey and empowered teaching contract provisions outcomes—the conditions of teacher empowerment as defined for this study. Each predictor variable describing some aspect of unionism in Table 4 has been assigned a label that is also listed in parentheses in the discussion which follows. At this juncture, a comment about the statistical analysis underlying the discovery of variable relationships may be in order.

Attention is directed here to those statistically significant regression coefficients obtained, since it is the value of the coefficient that indicates the degree of relationship between variables; a low coefficient value indicates a low relationship, even when the correlation is statistically significant. However, because the unionism variables utilized frequently employ different units of measurement, coefficient values cannot always be straightforwardly compared to find the single strongest predictor of teacher empowerment in rural school districts. Rather, it becomes necessary to speak in terms of "equivalencies" in strength of influence among the predictor unionism variables by examining the impact upon an increase in points toward agreement on the survey or a higher probability that a particular empowerment provision will be seen in a contract.

Table 4. Positive Relationships Between Unionism Characteristics and Empowerment Outcomes—Summary of Multivariate Regression Analysis

Unionism Characteristics	Empowerment Survey Items by Respondent Group and Empowered Teaching Contract Provisions					
	Union Pres.	Supt.	Elem.	Middle	High	Contract
Collective Bargaining Environment						
YEARS	6, 12, 14	15	NA	7, 14, 15, 16	9, 10, 16	4
EARLY	7, 8	NA	NA	9	3, 5, 16, 17	4
SALCHG	NA	4, 5, 7, 8, 9	9, 11	5, 9	4	2, 5
Union Affiliation						
NEAAFF	2	NA	NA	NA	NA	7
AFTAFF	2	NA	15	NA	NA	NA
Demographic						
LENGTH	9	NA	15	9	NA	NA
SEX	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	5
Professional MASTERS	NA	5	NA	1, 16	16	NA
Locational NORTH	9	NA	15, 16	15	4, 14, 16	8

Note: Items reported are those statistically significant at the .05 level of confidence.

Collective Bargaining Environment

The longer a teacher union has been bargaining, and the larger the number of empowerment items attained in the contract early in the bargaining history leads to increased feelings of empowerment by union presidents and the rank-and-file teachers in rural school districts. The number of years a teacher union has been bargaining (YEARS) was associated with a greater feeling of empowerment on a total of eight different survey items for those respondents. The variable for early strength in bargaining (EARLY), indicating whether sampled local unions had won contracts that contained up to three empowerment provisions up to five years earlier, was similarly related to perceptions of increased empowerment for these

groups on seven survey items. Between these two variables, an additional five years of bargaining led to an increase in agreement by an average of .6939 survey points for union presidents, .8186 points for middle school teachers, and .8562 points for high school teachers on the significant empowerment survey items. Each additional contract provision of the three possible under the definition of the EARLY variable provided an average improvement of .2209 points for the union presidents, .2283 points on one significant statement for the middle school teachers, and .3204 points for the high school teachers. Interestingly, in both cases, these perceptions were not shared by elementary level teachers.

It can be argued that the prominence of the variable reflecting the number of years the local union has been collectively bargaining with the school district is supportive of a developmental model of collective bargaining in rural school districts as earlier proposed by McDonnell and Pascal [9]. The more mature the bargaining relationship, the more likely it was that the conditions of empowerment as defined were manifested. Once wages, fringe benefits, and key working conditions items have been codified through collective bargaining, it may then be possible to be concerned with enhancing conditions of empowerment.

The variable representing the presence of empowerment provisions in the contract early on seemingly follows similar assumptions, though the attainment of contractual items early in the bargaining process may again be viewed as contributing to greater feelings of empowerment by teachers, but not necessarily to more empowerment provisions in subsequent contracts.

Also notable is the finding that salary increases were apparently not bargained as a trade-off for teacher empowerment outcomes in rural school districts. Every 10 percent increase in starting teacher salary (SALCHG) over six school years in the contracts predicted over one-half of a one-point increase in agreement with five survey statements for superintendents. An equivalent percentage increase in salary had effects in the same direction of .6745 points and .5750 points for the elementary and middle school teachers over only two statements for each group.

Though there was not statistical evidence to support a trade-off between this compensation variable and teacher empowerment in rural districts, it must be remembered that the enhanced empowerment associated with a higher increase in salary over the selected years was more reflective of the perceptions of the respondents, and not based in contractual language to any great extent. This was especially true for the superintendents, who may tend to equate substantial salary increases with increased empowerment more so than any of the teachers.

Union Affiliation

None of the predictor variables representing a union's affiliation had a notably strong and positive effect on empowerment outcomes for teachers in rural school districts. Teachers did not perceive greater empowerment as a result of organizational affiliation with either the National Education Association (NEA) or the

American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The variable representing NEA affiliation (NEAAFF) contributed only to union presidents' agreement by just over two points with the survey statement that teachers are free from having administrators intervene to change their grades. The AFT variable (AFTAFF) added approximately 2.7 points toward agreement for the presidents on the same survey item, and 1.9 points toward agreement for elementary teachers with the statement that they exercise control over the administrative disposition of student discipline cases. (A more surprising finding may well be the significant relationship of the NEA variable to superintendents' and teachers' disagreement with a total of seven different statements on the empowerment survey, and of the AFT variable to union presidents', superintendents', and high school teachers' disagreement with 8 different statements.)

Union affiliation provided only the slightest advantage for the attainment of empowerment provisions in contracts. The relationship between the variable for NEA affiliation and the contract provision that mandates teacher evaluation practices was the only significant one observed.

The fact that union representation by the NEA or the AFT affiliate provided no more favorable empowerment outcomes for teachers in this study parallels the results of Dworkin's [10] analysis of collective bargaining contracts, and both studies by McDonnell and Pascal [1, 9].

Role of Demographic, Professional, and Locational Characteristics

Except for the relative strength of the locational variable as compared to the others, the variables describing demographic and professional characteristics of rural teacher unions were not powerful predictors of teacher empowerment outcomes. Any theory that might underpin the relationship between the presence of these variables and the advancement of teacher empowerment was not validated by the findings. Variables describing the average length of service in years of teachers in the school district (LENGTH), the percentage of local teacher union membership that is male (SEX), and the percentage of local union membership that has a masters degree or higher (MASTERS) combined for significant associations in agreement with only five different empowerment survey items over all respondent groups.

A rural school district's location in northern Illinois (NORTH) did confer some advantage for increased empowerment as perceived by union presidents and rank-and-file teachers. (This relationship did not hold for the superintendents, but the variable did predict their disagreement with four of the empowerment survey items.) Teachers in northern Illinois districts were more likely to agree with four different survey statements by an average of almost 1.8 points. Two of the three teacher groups agreed with particular survey statements that teachers exercise

control over the administrative disposition of student discipline cases and influence teacher evaluation.

Overall results for the rural contracts reviewed were similarly weak, and the same relationship of the locational variable did not hold for the presence of empowerment items in contracts. While the variable did predict the appearance of the contractual provision relating to inservice training, it further was related to an average 60 percent likelihood that three other empowerment clauses would not appear in the contracts.

It may be that some "halo effect" does exist that affects teachers' feelings about their empowerment in rural school districts located next to their suburban and urban counterparts. Such is the case for those sampled rural districts located in northern Illinois, given the proximity of Chicago and the suburban collar counties.

CONCLUSIONS

Rural education has not escaped the calls from parents, citizens, politicians, business leaders, and educators themselves for fundamental educational reform that includes heightened teacher professionalism and empowerment. Teacher unions in rural school districts have attained certain core contractual provisions that are traditionally associated with greater empowerment for their membership. Perhaps more important, teacher empowerment in rural school districts would appear to be as much a product of shared perceptions of the respondent groups as a result of empowerment provisions bargained into teacher union contracts. Attempts at rural education reform should follow from an understanding of the role of teacher unions in contributing to the conditions within which such reform takes place. Some of those understandings bear discussion.

First, teacher unionism and the collective bargaining process is associated to some extent with increased teacher empowerment in rural school districts. As such, it would seem to make sense to involve rural unions in the exploration and development of more formalized reform proposals. Rural teacher unions are the collective voice of the teaching profession in rural education. The union should thus share some legitimate leadership role in informing and educating the membership about developments in school reform and teacher empowerment and by taking the initiative in suggesting reform policies. For some of the smallest and most isolated rural school districts, the union may provide the only avenue for this leadership to be exercised.

Second, the data suggest that teachers do bargain empowerment provisions in some crude predictive order, starting with those items most closely associated with traditional notions of working conditions, with provisions dealing with such items as student achievement and curriculum receiving less attention at the bargaining table initially. This bargaining continuum must be remembered by those rural school boards that might wish to rush in and bargain new conditions for teaching and learning in rural classrooms. There will likely be a demand to

bargain other things, namely provisions governing teacher evaluation, inservice, and assignment refusal, first.

Third, the fact that no predictive model was borne out by this analysis reinforces the conclusion that there is no conventional wisdom about the attainment of teacher empowerment in rural school districts. It may be the case that local factors and conditions forestall teacher empowerment from simply "appearing" in rural school districts that meet some set of specified criteria. The predictive quality of certain factors exogenous to rural school districts' control was earlier asserted by Eberts and Stone [11]. If enhanced teacher empowerment is viewed as a desirable outcome in rural education, it may need to be actively sought given certain local contexts.

Finally, rural school districts, because they tend to be smaller, may be able to establish certain teacher empowerment outcomes and resolve problems between teachers and rural school boards in a less adversarial fashion than is usually embodied in the traditional collective bargaining approach. That is, the smallness and familiarity among the teaching and administrative staff, and the board itself, can make it much easier to handle difficulties associated with increased empowerment (such as the demand for more resources by teachers, changing accountability structures, the degree of acceptance of unions by the local community, and the like) than in larger school districts. Whether or not this is the case, it does seem apparent that collective bargaining need not be the only method or approach in working with teacher unions toward empowerment outcomes in rural school districts. Clearly, this opinion holds implications for the field of educational labor relations in general.

There exists overall a need to see how a teacher union's agenda focusing on empowerment concerns actually plays out in a school district. Given the dearth of empirical investigation in the area, this is particularly true for rural school districts. Systematic inquiry into teacher unions that have chosen to pursue empowerment strategies within the rural school context must next take place to answer multiple questions: 1) how such strategies are accepted by the membership; 2) how the state of educational labor relations in a given district affects policy-making beyond the collectively bargained contract; 3) how the type and quality of decisionmaking at the school and district levels changes in districts with high empowerment outcomes; and d) how enhancing teacher empowerment changes the nature of teachers', administrators', and other key actors' work roles. Questions of this type can be answered only with a more thorough comprehension of the process of teacher empowerment across all school districts.

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