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# Power, Accountability, and the Teacher Quality Problem

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## **Abstract**

Few educational issues have received more attention in recent times than the problem of ensuring that our nation's elementary and secondary classrooms are all staffed with quality teachers. Concern with teacher quality is not surprising. Elementary and secondary schooling is mandatory in the United States and it is into the care of teachers that children are legally placed for a significant portion of their lives. The quality of teachers and teaching is undoubtedly among the most important factors shaping the learning and growth of students. Moreover, the largest single component of the cost of education is teacher compensation. Especially since the seminal *Nation at Risk* report in 1983, a seemingly endless stream of studies, commissions, and national reports have targeted teacher quality as one of the central problems facing schools.

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## Power, Accountability, and the Teacher Quality Problem

*Richard M. Ingersoll*

Few educational issues have received more attention in recent times than the problem of ensuring that our nation's elementary and secondary classrooms are all staffed with quality teachers. Concern with teacher quality is not surprising. Elementary and secondary schooling is mandatory in the United States and it is into the care of teachers that children are legally placed for a significant portion of their lives. The quality of teachers and teaching is undoubtedly among the most important factors shaping the learning and growth of students. Moreover, the largest single component of the cost of education is teacher compensation. Especially since the seminal *Nation at Risk* report in 1983, a seemingly endless stream of studies, commissions, and national reports have targeted teacher quality as one of the central problems facing schools. Critics have blamed the performance of teachers for myriad social ills: the erosion of American economic competitiveness and productivity, the decline in student academic achievement, teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency and crime, the coarsening of our everyday discourse and culture, a decline in morals, gender and racial stereotyping and discrimination, and on and on (see e.g., Bennett, 1993; Levin, 1998; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Urban League, 1999). As a result, in recent decades a host of initiatives and programs seeking to upgrade teacher quality have been pushed by reformers at the federal, state, and local levels.

Although ensuring that our nation's classrooms are all staffed with quality teachers is a perennially important issue in our schools, it is also, however, among the least understood. This misunderstanding centers on the sources of the problem, the reasons behind the purportedly low quality of teachers and teaching in American schools, and it has undermined the success of reform efforts. Behind the criticism and reforms

are a variety of differing perspectives as to the sources of the problems plaguing the teaching occupation.

One of the most popular perspectives has to do with the control and accountability of the teaching force. Schools, this view claims, are marked by low standards, a lack of coherence, poor management, and little effort to ensure adequate supervision and control, especially in regard to their primary activity—the work of teachers with students. Teachers are not held accountable and simply do what they want behind the closed doors of their classrooms. The predictable result, this view holds, is low-quality performance on the part of teachers and students.

In this chapter I offer a critique of this accountability perspective. My argument is that this view overlooks some of the most important sources and forms of organizational control and accountability that already exist in schools and, as a result, overlooks the ways schools themselves, and in particular the ways they are managed and organized, contribute to the teacher quality problem. In plain terms, poorly run schools can make otherwise excellent teachers not so excellent.

For those who subscribe to the accountability perspective, the obvious antidote to the ills of the education system is to increase the centralized control of schools and to seek to hold teachers more accountable, in short, to “tighten the ship.” Typically, proponents of this view advocate methods and mechanisms, such as teacher entry examinations, the use of standardized curricula, and especially the implementation of explicit performance standards coupled with more rigorous teacher evaluation. A prominent focus in the accountability movement is to change the traditional ways that teachers have been assessed, evaluated, and rewarded, in regard to employment decisions about teacher hiring, assignment, transfer, layoffs, promotions, and salary. The traditional public school approach largely bases these kinds of decisions on measures of teachers’ qualifications, usually the amount of teaching experience, postsecondary courses completed, and type of licensure or certification. The thrust of many accountability critics is to deny a strong link between these traditional measures of qualifications and the actual quality and performance of teachers and to therefore push to replace the former with new approaches that better capture quality and merit. A variety of new approaches have been developed and implemented, such as the controversial “value-added” model, which attempts to assess teachers by assessing gains in their students’ test scores. Many of these accountability mechanisms have become widely used since the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002.

A lack of control and accountability is, of course, not the only explanation given for the problem of low-quality teachers and teaching. Nor is this perspective universally believed; indeed, it is the subject of much contention. But it is a prominent view, a growing part of the conventional

wisdom about what ails teaching, and has had an increasing impact on reform and policy.

Over the past 2 decades, I have undertaken a series of research projects on the levels, distribution, and effects of control and accountability in schools (Ingersoll, 2003). This research has involved analyses of a wide array of data, both qualitative and quantitative. A major source of data was the nationally representative Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, the statistical arm of the U.S. Department of Education. Conducted every few years since the late 1980s, this survey is the largest and most comprehensive source of information on teachers that is available (each cycle of SASS includes about 55,000 teachers in both the public and private sectors). From this survey I analyzed data on an unusually wide range of information on the characteristics, work, and attitudes of both teachers and administrators, and on the characteristics and conditions of schools and districts across the country.

Another quantitative data source I used is the International Survey of the Locus of Decision-Making in Educational Systems, conducted by the Center for Educational Research and Innovation, part of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation Development (OECD). OECD is a leading international research and development organization based in Paris and one of the best sources of international data on education; this particular survey collected information on the control of schooling across a range of nations. These data proved valuable because they allowed me to compare the system of school governance and control in the United States to that in other nations.

Finally, I also undertook a field study of four schools in the Philadelphia area, chosen to be as varied as possible. My fieldwork included observing life in school cafeterias, halls, meetings, and classrooms; conducting in-depth interviews with administrators and teachers; and examining school documents, faculty manuals, and policy handbooks. From this research I have come to the conclusion that the accountability movement often involves wrong diagnoses of, and wrong prescriptions for, problems of teacher quality.

Often underlying accountability initiatives is what might be called a "teacher deficit" viewpoint. The assumption underlying this view is that the primary source of low-quality teaching in schools lies in various deficits in teachers themselves—their ability, commitment, engagement, or effort. Hence, the attendant assumption is that the best way to fix schools is to fix these deficits in individual teachers through increased rules and regulations, incentives, and sanctions, "sticks and carrots."

Proponents of the accountability perspective identify important issues and problems. Accountability in schools is reasonable and necessary and the public has a right and, indeed, an obligation to be

concerned with the performance of teachers. There is no question that some teachers are poorly performing and inadequate for the job, in one way or another.

However, my argument in this chapter is that the accountability perspective offers only a partial, one-sided explanation and as a result the reforms it has spawned often do not work and can even make things worse. In this chapter I offer an alternative theoretical perspective drawn from the sociology of organizations, occupations, and work. My operating premise, drawn from this perspective, is that fully understanding issues of teacher quality requires examining the character of the teaching occupation and of the organizations in which teachers work. In contrast to a teacher deficit viewpoint, this perspective seeks to illuminate the ways the organizational characteristics of schools and of the teaching occupation themselves contribute to the problem of teaching quality. In other words, the goal of this alternative perspective is to illuminate the ways in which individual teacher troubles are really public issues, indelibly shaped by the larger occupational and organizational context, a way of looking that the sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) referred to as the "sociological imagination."

### WHO CONTROLS TEACHERS' WORK?

Historically, in the United States the control of elementary and secondary schooling developed in an unusual manner. In contrast with most European nations, public schooling in this country was originally begun on a highly democratized, localized basis. The resulting legacy is a current system of some 15,000 individual public school districts, governed by local school boards of citizens, each with legal responsibility for the administration and operation of publicly funded, universal, mandatory, elementary and secondary schooling. Of course, local school districts in the United States are clearly no longer the autonomous bodies they once were. Over the past half century, myriad other organizational actors have increasingly exerted or sought to influence control of schooling, including state governments, external pressure groups, and the judicial system. Most recently, we have seen an unprecedented expansion of the federal role in education through the No Child Left Behind Act. Nevertheless, comparative data from a number of nations indicate that, despite these changes, schooling in the United States still remains a far more nonfederal and local affair than in most other systems.

While the education system in the United States is relatively decentralized, schools themselves are not. Most public and private secondary schools are highly centralized internally. In other words, the data show

that while school principals and school governing boards often have substantial control over many key decisions in schools, teachers usually do not. There are differences among different types of schools but overall and on average, teachers have had little power, influence, or control over many key decisions concerned with the day-to-day management of their work and their workplaces. For instance, teachers often have little influence over larger schoolwide decisions that shape the instructional program, such as establishing the overall curriculum for the school, conceiving changes and innovations to the curriculum, and even choosing their own course textbooks. Teachers often have little input over decisions concerned with their course schedule, their class sizes, the office and classroom space they will use, and the use of school discretionary funds for classroom materials. On average, teachers have very limited control over which courses they are assigned to teach.

Teachers usually have little input into hiring, firing, and budgetary decisions. They further have little input into the means and criteria by which they, or school administrators, are evaluated. Teachers frequently have little say in the determination over the content of their own on-the-job development and in-service training programs.

A similar account holds for teachers' influence over the clients they serve—students. For example, teachers often have little say over what kind of student ability grouping the school has and which students are placed into which tracks or ability levels. Teachers typically have little say over decisions surrounding whether to promote particular students or to hold them back to repeat a grade. Teachers, overall, have little input into schoolwide behavioral and disciplinary rules and standards for students. Likewise, teachers have little influence over the assignment of students and who is enrolled in their courses. In addition, rarely do teachers have the authority to have disruptive students removed from their classroom, even temporarily. Teachers also usually have almost no influence over the rules and standards of student expulsion from schools. In other words, teachers rarely have the right to not teach particular students, even if they are disruptive and regardless of whether the student wishes to be in school or not. As described by Lortie (1975), the relationship between teacher and student continues to be one of "dual captivity"; teachers are public servants who cannot choose not to serve their clients and their clients are recipients of a public service who cannot choose not to be served. This stands in sharp distinction to members of the traditional professions, such as lawyers, academics, accountants, physicians, or psychotherapists, who often can have a substantial degree of choice over whom they serve. For instance, unlike teachers, within the constraints of the market, and depending on the type of institutions and organizations in which they

are employed, lawyers, accountants, and psychotherapists may have the option not to work with particular clients.

The degree of power and control practitioners hold over workplace decisions is one of the most important criteria distinguishing the degree of professionalization and the status of a particular occupation or line of work (Freidson, 1986). Professionalized employees usually have control and autonomy approaching that of senior management when it comes to organizational decisions surrounding their work. University professors and other academics, for example, often have equal or greater control than that of university administrators over the content of their teaching and research, over the hiring of new colleagues and, through the institution of peer review, over the evaluation and promotion of members and, hence, over the ongoing content and character of their profession. Members of lower-status occupations usually have little say over their work. The data show that in comparison with traditional professions, teachers have only limited power and control over key workplace decisions that affect their work.

This hierarchy in schools is both understandable and consequential, given the nature of the work of teachers. Schools are not simply formal organizational entities engineered to deliver academic instruction and schools do not simply teach children reading, writing, and arithmetic. Schools are a major mechanism for the socialization of children and youth, a process captured in the contemporary concept of social capital (see chapter 9). The task of deciding which behavior and values are proper and best for the young is not trivial, neutral, or value free. Hence, it is no surprise that those who do this work—teachers—and how they go about it are matters of intense concern. Indeed, underlying the accountability movement is the understandable assumption that education is far too important to be left up solely to educators.

As a result, teaching is an occupation beset by tension and imbalance between expectations and resources, responsibilities, and powers. On the one hand, the work of teaching, helping prepare, instruct, and rear the next generation of children is both important and complex. But on the other hand, those who are entrusted with the training of this next generation are not entrusted with much control over many of the key decisions concerned with this crucial work. Moreover, the data suggest this imbalance is increasing. After little change from the late 1980s to 2000, levels of individual teacher classroom autonomy in schools across the nation, especially in regard to the selection of texts, content, topics, and evaluation of students in their courses, have decreased in the past decade.

## THE TEACHER IN THE MIDDLE

Control and accountability can be exerted in a wide range of different ways in schools, as in other workplaces. These are not necessarily a matter of direct and obvious mechanisms, such as rules and regulations, incentives and sanctions, "sticks and carrots." Indeed, organizational analysts have long held that the most effective mechanisms by which employees are controlled and held accountable are often embedded in the day-to-day culture of the workplace and, hence, are often taken for granted and invisible to both insiders and outsiders alike (Perrow, 1986). This is reflected in the role of teachers in schools. Teachers are akin to men or women in the middle. A useful analogy is that of supervisors caught between the contradictory demands and needs of their superiors, school administrators, and their subordinates, students. In this analogy teachers are not typically part of the management of schools, nor are teachers the workers. Teachers are in charge of, and responsible for, the workers—their students. While teachers are allowed limited input into crucial decisions concerned with the management of schools and into crucial decisions concerned with their work, teachers are delegated a great deal of responsibility for the implementation of these decisions. Like middlemen and -women in other occupations, teachers usually work alone and may have much latitude in seeing that their students carry out the tasks assigned to them. This responsibility and latitude can easily be mistaken for a kind of professional-like autonomy, especially in regard to tasks within classrooms. A close look at the organization of the teaching job shows, however, that while it involves the delegation of much responsibility, it involves little real power.

The motives, values, and aspirations of those entering teaching dramatically differ from those entering many other occupations. An unusually large proportion of teachers are motivated by what is called an "altruistic" or "publicservice" ethic. Such individuals place less importance on extrinsic rewards (such as income and prestige) and less emphasis on intrinsic rewards (such as intellectual challenge or self-expression) and more importance on the opportunity to contribute to the betterment of society, to work with people, to serve their community, to help others, in short, to do "good." Numerous studies over the past several decades have concluded that those entering teaching are more likely to value service and less likely to value pecuniary rewards than are those entering most other occupations, including law, engineering, natural or social science, sales, advertising, business, architecture, journalism, or art (Farkas, Johnson, & Foleno, 2000; Lortie, 1975; Miech & Elder, 1996; Rosenberg, 1957/1980).

This altruistic ethic, combined with teachers' mixed role of great responsibility along with little power is reflected in the widespread practice among teachers of spending their own money on classroom materials. Teachers often find, for various reasons, that their school does not, or will not, provide the curriculum materials, stationery, and supplies they deem necessary to do an adequate job with their students. The national data show that teachers have little access to, or control over, school discretionary funds. They must request these monies through administrative channels, a sometimes frustrating and unsuccessful experience. As a result, teachers commonly pay for such materials out of pocket.

Since 1989 there have been a half dozen different national surveys documenting this phenomenon. For example, in analyses of SASS data from the 2007–8 school year, I found that teachers had spent, on average, about \$395 of their own money the prior year for classroom supplies, without reimbursement. Only 9% of teachers reported spending none of their own money that year for such materials. Notably, this commitment and public service was not merely a matter of youthful idealism; the data show that older and veteran teachers spent more of their own money, on average, than did younger and beginning teachers. Moreover, public school teachers spent more than did private school teachers and teachers employed in high-poverty schools spent more than those in low-poverty schools.

These data on out-of-pocket expenditures illustrate a remarkable responsibility, commitment, and accountability on the part of individuals, in the face of a remarkable lack of responsibility, commitment, or accountability on the part of the organizations and publics that employ these individuals. The data suggest that in that year alone, a workforce of teachers, mostly female, numbering almost 4 million, donated over \$1.5 billion of educational materials to schools! This kind of teacher public service and subsidization of the school system received unprecedented recognition in federal legislation, proposed by the George W. Bush administration in 2001, to provide tax deductions to teachers for their out-of-pocket expenditures for classroom materials.

Teacher financial subsidization of public schools is all the more notable because teaching is a relatively low-paying occupation. The SASS data indicate that in 2007–8 the average starting salary in public schools for a teacher with a bachelor's degree and no teaching experience was about \$32,000 and the average maximum salary possible at the end of one's career was \$61,000. The salaries of new college graduates who become teachers have long been consistently and considerably below those of new college graduates who choose many other occupations. For example, the average salary (one year after graduation) for college graduates

who become teachers is typically almost 50% less than the average starting salary of their classmates who take computer science jobs (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011). Moreover, this disparity remains throughout the career span. Teachers' salaries are less than those in many other lines of work and far less than those of most traditional professionals. For instance, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that in 2007 the average annual salaries of teachers were less than one-third of the average annual salaries of physicians, less than one-half those of lawyers, and about two-thirds those of college and university professors in the arts and sciences. Using these salary data, it is possible to make a crude calculation of an equivalent level of personal out-of-pocket accountability and public service for these professions. The \$395 estimate for teachers represented almost 1% of the average school teacher salary that year. Thus, a rough equivalent of average out-of-pocket expenditures for the purchase of materials necessary to serve their clients would come to (in 2007 dollars) about \$630 a year on the part of professors; about \$1,100 a year for lawyers; and about \$1,500 a year for doctors.

### **THE DIFFERENCE THAT TEACHER CONTROL CAN MAKE**

What difference does the amount of teacher control over their work make for how well schools function? Does increasing the amount of influence exercised by teachers in schools have a positive or negative impact on life inside schools?

From the public's viewpoint, a safe and harmonious environment in schools is as important as academic achievement. From much of the public's viewpoint the "good" school is characterized by well-behaved students; a collegial, committed staff; and a general sense of cooperation, communication, and community. Likewise, the "bad" school is characterized by conflict, distrust, and turmoil between students, teachers, and administrators. Problems of student discipline; lack of respect for teachers; improper behavior in classrooms; and conflict, distrust, and turmoil between teachers and administrators have long been considered of great importance to parents; however, in recent years increased concern over school violence has made these even more prominent. To evaluate some of the consequences of teacher control and influence, I undertook a series of advanced multilevel regression analyses of the SASS data focusing on the relationship between the amount of control and power held by teachers and these kinds of school climate outcomes. In these analyses I controlled for the effects of other school characteristics, such as school size; student poverty levels; whether a school is in an urban, rural, or suburban setting; and whether it is private or

public and also for other teacher characteristics, such as experience, fields, gender, and race.

I found in my analyses that, after the characteristics of schools and teachers are held constant, school problems are directly connected to the distribution of power and control in a wide range of schools. The data show that, while most schools are centralized, there is substantial variation in the degree of teacher control among different kinds of schools and the latter is strongly linked to how well schools function. Schools where teachers have more control over key schoolwide and classroom decisions have fewer problems with student misbehavior, have more collegiality and cooperation among teachers and administrators, have a more committed teaching staff, and do a better job of retaining their teachers.

However, I also found that the effects of teacher control and influence on these outcomes varies by the type of decision or issue involved. Interestingly, the data show that one of the most consequential sets of decisions has to do with a particular group of nonacademic issues—school and classroom student behavior and discipline policies. For instance, I examined the relationship between the average amount of teacher influence over decisions concerned with school and classroom discipline issues and the likelihood that teachers stay in or depart from their schools. In order to focus on those kinds of departures that were more likely to be related to the character of schools, I excluded from the analysis teachers who departed their jobs because of retirement, layoffs, or school closings or because of being fired or terminated. I found that teacher control over such issues in a school is very strongly related to the percentage of turnover. Almost 1 in 5 teachers in schools with a low level of teacher control over student discipline issues was likely to depart, while far fewer, less than 1 in 20, was likely to do so from schools with a high level of teacher control over such issues.

Why is teacher control over this particular set of issues so consequential? The data also indicate that teachers have substantial responsibility for the enforcement of student behavioral and discipline rules and for maintaining an orderly school and classroom. But the data tell us that teachers often have little input into schoolwide behavioral and disciplinary rules, norms, and standards for students; they are largely conceived by others. And teachers often have little say over the types of sanctions used to enforce these rules. For example, teachers are often not allowed to remove students who are disrupting their classrooms, teachers often must first obtain permission to sanction a student infraction, and teachers are often not allowed to punish students who are caught cheating on tests. These limitations on teacher control can also undermine their ability to be in charge of their classrooms and to meet their responsibilities. The data suggest that this lack of control also leads to high turnover rates.

At the crux of the role and of the success of teachers, as the man or woman in the middle, is their level of control and power over the tasks and issues for which they are responsible. On the one hand, if teachers have sufficient say over the decisions surrounding those activities for which they are responsible, they will be more able to exert sufficient influence to see that the job is done properly and, in turn, derive respect from administrators, colleagues, and students. On the other hand, if teachers' power and control over school and classroom policies is not sufficient to accomplish the tasks for which they are responsible, they will meet neither group's needs and will sour their relationships. The teacher who has little control and power is the teacher who is less able to get things done, is the teacher with less credibility. Students can more easily ignore such a teacher; indeed, timidity seems to invite challenge. Principals can more easily neglect backing them. Peers may be more likely to shun them. This, in turn, could lead such teachers to feel less commitment to their teaching job or the teaching career.

### **BALANCING POWER AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

The accountability perspective, and many of the reforms to come out of it, commonly suffers from several problems. The first involves the accuracy of their diagnosis. The data show that the high degree of centralization in schools and a lack of teacher control of their work, rather than the opposite, is often the source of problems in how well schools function. As a result, these kinds of top-down accountability reforms may divert attention from the organizational sources of school problems.

Second, accountability reforms are sometimes unfair. For instance, proponents of top-down accountability reforms often overlook the unusual character of the teaching workforce. It is common among these analysts and reformers to subscribe to a teacher deficit viewpoint assuming that the blame lies with the caliber of individual teachers. A litany of such critics has told us again and again that teachers lack sufficient engagement, commitment, and accountability. But the earlier data suggest that teachers have an unusual degree of public service orientation and commitment and a relatively high "giving-to-getting" ratio, compared with many other occupations. Unrecognized and unappreciated by these critics is the extent to which the teaching workforce is a source of human, social, and even financial capital in schools.

Third, for the preceding reasons accountability reforms often don't work. Top-down reforms draw attention to an important set of needs—accountability on the part of those doing the work. But these kinds of reforms sometimes overlook another equally important set of needs, the autonomy and goodwill of those doing the work. Too much

organizational control may deny teachers the very control and flexibility they need to do the job effectively and undermine the motivation of those doing the job. A high degree of centralized control may squander a valuable human resource—the unusual degree of commitment of those who enter the teaching occupation. Having little say in the terms, processes, and outcomes of their work may undermine the ability of teachers to feel they are doing worthwhile work, the very reason many of them came into the occupation in the first place, and end up contributing to the high rates of turnover among teachers. As a result, such reforms may not only fail to solve the problems they seek to address but also end up making things worse.

There is no question that there are problems with the quality of teachers and teaching. Moreover, it is neither convincing nor valid to simply pass most of the blame for low-quality teaching and educational failure elsewhere, for instance, onto families. Proponents of accountability in schools are right; schools, like all organizations designed to serve the collective needs of the public, need to be accountable to that public. However, the accountability perspective typically offers only a partial, one-sided explanation and as a result often overlooks the ways schools themselves, and in particular how they are managed and organized, contribute to the teacher quality problem. In plain terms, simply recruiting quality candidates and holding them more accountable will not solve the problem of quality if the manner in which the job itself is organized and managed undermines those same candidates.

Experts on organizational management and leadership (e.g., Whyte & Blasi, 1982) have long advocated a balanced approach. Accountability and power must go hand in hand in workplaces, and increases in one must be accompanied by increases in the other. Imbalances between the two can result in problems for both the employee and for the organization. Delegating power to employees or management without commensurate responsibility is irresponsible and can even be dangerous and harmful. That is, giving teachers more power alone is not the answer. Likewise, accountability without commensurate power is unfair and can also be harmful. In other words, it does not make sense to hold employees accountable for something they do not control, nor does it make sense to give someone control over something for which they are not held accountable. Both these changes are necessary, but neither alone is sufficient. Promising examples of this more balanced model of school organization have sprung up in recent years. For example, there is a growing network of charter schools in the Midwest that are operated and run by teachers (Kolderie, 2008). These schools are often referred to as “partnership schools” because they are modeled after law partnerships, where lawyers, as professionals,

both manage and ultimately are accountable for the organization and its success (Hawkins, 2009). From this alternative perspective, solving the problem of teacher quality will require addressing the underlying roots of the problem. The focus of reform would need to shift from solely getting (or producing) "better people for the job" to also getting "a better job for the people" (Kolderie, 2008). Rather than solely focusing on trying to force the existing arrangement to work better, this alternative view suggests the importance of viewing teacher quality issues as organizational and occupational design issues, suggesting the necessity of a different arrangement, better built for those who do the work of teaching.

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