

# From the Practitioner's Desk: Enhancing Adoption through Community Building

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## Abstract

*Often child protection services remain separate and isolated from most of the community, despite the fact that the well-being of all children is the responsibility of the whole community. Using the principles of asset-based community development, also called community building, as set out by John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993), this paper reports on a community-building intervention to enhance adoption and foster care services in an eastern North Carolina county. The first phase of the project, carried out by the author, involved enlisting community constituents in a planning exercise to design creative and innovative strategies to enhance adoptive and foster care services. Collaboration among university faculty, Master of Social Work students, the Department of Social Services, consumers, service groups, volunteers, and other service providers resulted in six initiatives that met the mandate of the project and were relevant to the local community. Issues of evaluation and sustainability are discussed.*

**Keywords;** *child welfare, community building, community development, asset-based community development, asset-based social work, coalition*

## Introduction

To the general public, adoption is an option for couples to enjoy the benefits of a family. Most couples would like to adopt a healthy baby. We know from the media that there are few healthy babies available for adoption now, so many families opt for an international adoption. This is, however, just part of the story of adoption; it is *not* the story of public adoption in the United States. Public adoption starts at the other side of the equation, with children who can no longer be raised by their parents. Either their parents are missing (dead, in

jail, or having abandoned their children) or they have intractable inadequacies in their ability to look after their children. They are either neglectful or abusive, and their behavior has resulted in a court decision to terminate their parental rights. Sometimes, acknowledging their own inadequacies, parents voluntarily relinquish their parental rights. This language is cold and legalistic, but the result is that a child becomes the responsibility of the state.

This paper reports on an attempt to use the strategies of asset-based community development (ABCD), also called *community building*, to enhance public adoption in a small, poor county in North Carolina. This case example describes a university-based social worker working in collaboration with the public Department of Social Services to use the principles set out by John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993) to improve adoption services in the county.

## The Context

While the banking industry in Charlotte, North Carolina (NC), and the Research Triangle in the Raleigh-Durham area flourish, eastern North Carolina struggles to adapt to the decline in tobacco growing and furniture manufacturing. Although the crops are changing to cotton and soybeans and an industrial base is struggling to emerge, this part of the United States remains rural and poor (Making a Difference in the South [MDC], 2000). Tipp County, NC (not its real name), is situated in the middle of the eastern part of the state. Almost half of the county's population of 133, 798 lives in a small city of about 60,000 inhabitants. The tax base is small and the needs are not. Tipp County Department of Social Services (DSS) accepted approximately 1,200 referrals for investigation of child abuse,

neglect, or dependency in 2002; only 300 reports were not accepted. Tipp County DSS has 13 investigators and 13 case manager positions. As of January 2003, 115 children were in DSS legal custody, and most were in foster homes; there were 53 foster homes in Tipp County. At that time there were 16 children for whom termination of parental rights or parental relinquishment had occurred. These children ranged in age from 16 months to 15 years old. Seven of these children were waiting for an adoptive family. All seven of these children had "special needs," meaning that they had emotional or behavioral problems, were of African-American or other non-White ethnicity, were part of a sibling group, or had had multiple placements. The permanency plan for all of these children in the custody of DSS was adoption (County DSS, 2003).

Like most communities in the United States, the job of finding a safe, loving, permanent home for these children falls to the social workers in the child welfare services at the Department of Social Services. The average member of the community does not even know these children exist. As one social worker put it, "We are in a boat with a child in the middle of an ocean, and our job is to get that child safely to shore. You are all on shore waiting for us but we are alone out here." Child protection services remain separate and isolated from most of the community. The project I report on in this article is an attempt to make the well-being of all children the responsibility and mission of the whole community and to embed child welfare in the community it serves.

I first became aware of the idea of ABCD and community building as a social work intervention in 2000, at a conference in North Carolina. The conference was about building partnerships between the community and social services. Mostly, that meant agencies working with agencies, but one presenter talked about something different. Henry Moore was formerly the city manager of Savannah, Georgia. At the time of the conference, he had become

a consultant in ABCD and was on faculty at Northwestern University's Asset-Based Community Development Institute. He was talking about the work he had been involved in Savannah, Georgia, and about the principles of asset-based community building. As a social worker, I understood the principles of community development and taught what was called "indirect" practice at my university, but the work of John Kretzmann and John McKnight was new to me. The ideas that they have developed, through research, into hundreds of successful community projects and initiatives made perfect sense to me. Yet I could see how we, as social workers, missed the point in our attempts to use a macro approach when addressing child welfare issues. We work from the problem, not the strengths; we define the solutions and we work in isolation. However, in a time when a variety of fields outside of social work were discovering or rediscovering community development (Saleebey, 2006), this model seemed a perfect match with the social work profession.

## Community Building

Community building, specifically the principles set out by John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993), focuses on strengthening the internal social and economic fabric of communities—what Robert Putnam (1995b) named *social capital*—and enhancing the community's own capacity to do for itself. This is accomplished through collaborative partnerships among community stakeholders (Smock, 2004). Community building develops and sustains strong relationships and increases community social capacity to achieve workable consensus about goals, how to pursue those goals, and how to cooperate to achieve those goals (Mattessich & Monsey, 1997). Emphasis is placed on developing the natural leadership within a community and unifying stakeholders around a shared vision. Collaboration can leverage assets that already exist in a community in innovative ways to address issues and problems

identified by the community itself (Smock, 2004). Connecting and combining assets multiplies their power and effectiveness (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The process is also valuable in itself: "The outcomes of community building efforts are an improved capacity to accomplish tasks and goals and a heightened sense of community . . . not the actual accomplishment of goals" (Mattessich & Monsey, 1997, p. 9).

## The Proposal

In 2002, I was active on the board of the Eastern North Carolina Poverty Committee, firm in my belief that working against poverty worked for child well-being. The chair of the board worked at Tipp County DSS. Through that connection, I was asked if I would be interested in submitting a proposal to "enhance adoption in the county." DSS had some money and was looking for proposals on what to do with it. I said sure, but by this time my perspective was one of community building. I wrote a letter of intent suggesting what I would propose. Three of Kretzmann and McKnight's principles informed my thinking:

Principle 1: *Work from the assets in the community* (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). In this county, we had very dedicated child protection workers, as well as a large number of community organizations, service clubs, and voluntary organizations. The county had at least three other private organizations engaged in providing adoption and adoption services. It did not have many consumer groups. However, we had the president of the North Carolina Foster Parent Association just two hours away, and a statewide consumer organization for foster children and adults ages 14 to 24 called SaySo (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out!). Tipp County had a family support network, and I worked in a Master of Social Work program in a school of social work. I was the faculty member in the North Carolina Child Welfare Education Collaborative, a federally funded collaborative effort between DSS, the

state, and state universities to increase the number of professional social workers in child welfare work in North Carolina.

Principle 2: *Because the process is asset driven, it is necessarily internally focused* (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). This project would have to focus on the agenda developed by the individuals and organizations that made up the community assets, stressing what the people in the community see as most important; what they can invest in; and what they can create, hope for, and control. We would have to find what people cared enough about to act (Green, Moore, & O'Brien, 2006). The intervention would be to get all those assets in one place so that they could work out what was most important to them.

Principle 3: *The project must be relationship driven* (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The project would have to build, rebuild, support, and reinforce relationships between participants and constituents, organizations, and institutions. Therein lay the challenge. Thomas Wolff, in his article entitled "A Practitioner's Guide to Successful Coalitions," supported this point, saying, "Again and again, successful coalition builders emphasize the importance of establishing relationships and strong personal links with the people whom the coalition wants to engage and mobilize" (2001b, p. 3).

Once the funders approved my letter of intent, I asked to meet with the adoption team. During that meeting, team members outlined several areas that were a source of difficulty for them. I asked them what would help them carry out their jobs more easily. They gave me several practical suggestions. Also, I was aware of the relationship between public adoption and foster care. In Tipp County, almost 98% of adoptions are by the people who have been providing foster care for that child (County DSS). I made sure to include participation of the foster care team and foster parents in the proposal. I then submitted the proposal to the DSS director.



I soon discovered that I had already committed my first strategic error. The person who had first approached me, my colleague from the Poverty Committee, was not part of the child welfare team; she was a supervisor in another area. I had jumped directly to the adoption supervisor and then to the agency director. Somehow, I had missed the DSS social work administrator, who is responsible for all the social workers in child protection, including adoption, foster care, investigations, and LINKS. I got a call from my colleague, informing me that a new person had entered the picture and I had better meet with her immediately. Fortunately for me, the social work administrator was friendly, smart, and secure in her job. After we reviewed how this proposal could have gotten written without our ever meeting, we agreed to work together to make the project happen. Her support was essential, as was her understanding of the internal politics. Together we edited the proposal to avoid negative consequences and we put it forward. Her advocacy and support got the proposal accepted and we moved ahead.

In the proposal, I set out three goals and four strategies to meet those goals, developed from my initial meeting with the adoption team. The goals were: (1) to increase community awareness of adoption and the permanency needs of children and to improve the attitudes of community members regarding adopted and foster children; (2) to generate a pool of information about innovative ideas and approaches used in other states and countries to address the permanency needs of special-needs children in particular; and (3) to develop the capacity to pursue the funding to implement those ideas and strategies that were relevant to the needs of children and families in Tipp County. The strategies employed a community-building perspective:

1. Development of a community-based Adoption Enhancement Task Force to operate as a “think tank” in reviewing and generating ideas.

2. Development of public education campaigns run collaboratively by community organizations and DSS.
3. Development of a research team to explore and present innovative ideas and approaches to the Task Force.
4. Task Force selection of ideas, approaches, and strategies that were appropriate for their county and development of a framework to continue to pursue those approaches.

The proposed outcomes looked like this: (a) a detailed Adoption Awareness Plan for Tipp County DSS and community partners; (b) an existing community service organization that was committed to making adoption awareness its focus for the coming year; (c) selection of approaches or strategies to enhance adoption services, particularly for special-needs children; (d) identification of community partners to pursue pilot projects to enhance adoption; and (e) the means to fund and implement those approaches as pilot projects.

Because their support for this project was essential, I made sure to embed the input from the adoption team in the goals. They felt they did not get good cooperation or empathy for their children from some institutions in the community. They worked hard to put on events to raise public awareness, but this was on top of making new matches for children and supporting the matches they had already made. They identified the struggle to find families for their special-needs children and defined that for me. At the same time, I left the decision making power in the hands of the Task Force. My research team and I would coordinate, facilitate, and bring forward information. The planning was up to them.

## The Project

I worked closely with the social work administrator and my own community leads to develop a list of potential Task

Force members. Referring to Wolff (2001a, 2001b, 2001c), I wanted to engage the broadest cross-section of the community possible. To that end, I made a grid of constituencies, such as businesses, service organizations, service providers in mental health and education, and consumers such as foster and adoptive parents and foster children. The leads were then placed in the grid and I began contacting people. For those who expressed an initial interest, I arranged a meeting over coffee at the local coffee shop to discuss what we were trying to do and what they thought they could contribute. Many were confused by the vague nature of the task—come to some meetings, hear some ideas, make a plan—but almost all responded to the underlying goals. People in the community cared about its children and wanted to do something that might make their lives better. Many were flattered to be approached and excited about this new idea. I asked people to commit to four meetings between January and June, with no work outside the meetings and no extra meetings. Each meeting was from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. (we provided lunch).

The first meeting was held in the fellowship hall of a Baptist church, offered to us by one of the congregation who had been recommended by a friend and colleague as the person who got things done at that church. That church was a key participant because it had been involved with foster children and their families and with DSS in the past. This was an asset we wanted to nurture.

Twenty-seven people attended the first meeting, representing at least 15 organizations and 14 churches. I had not imagined such a large group, but the range of constituents was exciting. We had a number of DSS workers from the adoption and foster care teams, we had master of social work students on their field practicum. The county's lead school social worker and a community mental health worker were there. We had a representative from the Kiwanis service group. We had adoptive mothers and foster mothers,

adults who had been adopted, and adults who had been in foster care. We had the president of the North Carolina Foster Parents Association, herself a foster mother who drove two hours to get to our meeting to represent her organization and support our efforts. The meeting also included the information officer for the Tipp County government and the DSS grant writer. One of the private adoption agencies sent two workers, who proved to be key participants.

There were areas where my recruitment failed. There was no strong representation from the business community; they found the structure too vague. "Just tell us what you want us to do" was the usual response, but that apparently did not include coming to planning meetings. Some offered money, but we did not need money at this initial stage, so I said we would get back to them. The youth who were on the board of directors of the foster child consumer group, SaySo, did not show up even after my best efforts to encourage and support them. Finally, I had had no luck engaging the African-American churches to participate. These issues would have to be addressed.

The group was predominantly women and very culturally diverse. The setup was several large, round tables. The DSS workers tended to sit together; the mental health people and the students clustered in groups as well. Friction between DSS and mental health workers surfaced early. Subtle cues, both nonverbal and verbal, emerged from one group when the other was talking and vice versa. Relationship building would prove to be a challenge.

The first meeting focused on educating all participants regarding adoption and foster care services and issues. The DSS workers presented to the group and fielded questions. My student research assistants had done extensive research on innovative and creative projects and programs. They presented some of their material and asked the Task Force to indicate where they would like more information. Response to the DSS presentation was good, but the group

was not enthusiastic about the new ideas, much to the students' disappointment. In question-and-answer periods, some Task Force members still expressed lack of clarity about their purpose. Because the success of the coalition was to a great extent contingent on shared vision (Wolff, 2001b, 2001c; Smock, 2004), it was necessary to reiterate the goals and purpose of the group regularly. However, at the end of the first meeting informal feedback was very positive. People were happy to be there and had really enjoyed the good lunch.

The second meeting, approximately one month later, included speakers from other projects who came to talk about their programs. The response of the Task Force was enthusiastic and they talked to the guests over lunch. The students met with a more enthusiastic response to their material this time. When asked if the information about recruitment strategies was new to them, most of the DSS workers said no. When asked what recruitment strategies for adoptive and foster parents they used, they said they had never actually recruited. They relied on word of mouth, which did not always work.

As the meetings progressed, other people from the community asked to participate and the constituencies represented became even broader. Although many attempts were made to engage the local youth who belonged to SaySo, we were never successful in getting participation from an individual member. To overcome this shortcoming, regular consultation was taken by telephone and email with the one paid staff member of SaySo. The two research assistants attended a day-long meeting with the director of SaySo, the paid staff member, and SaySo Board members (all foster children or adults), to consult regarding the Task Force initiatives. Other potential participants who had been unable to attend or was not interested at the beginning responded to my persistence and joined the group. Some community members responded to the publicity we were able to generate and asked to participate.

By the end of the second meeting, held in February, the Task Force members were ready to begin developing a plan. I divided the membership into work groups, balancing each group for multiple constituencies. Each group was asked to generate initiatives that met the mandate of the Task Force. These could be ideas they had learned about through the Task Force, ideas they had learned about on their own, ideas they had developed themselves, or any combination thereof. They were not to be inhibited by the "how" at this point; they were simply to identify community partners that could be enlisted to help with the initiative. The work groups generated a large number of ideas. The social work administrator and I met after the meeting and attempted to synthesize the ideas into projects. Seven initiatives emerged. These initiatives met the criteria of raising awareness in the community about adoption and foster care and being appropriate for Tipp County. We would take them back to the Task Force later for development.

Several interesting things emerged at this point. First, the informal groups within the Task Force had started to break down. The tension between mental health and DSS was diffused and they were now standing and talking at breaks and over lunch. When a DSS worker expressed a particular frustration she had in getting transportation services for a client, the mental health worker offered to help with access to a service she had. Community members also formed small internal alliances. A community volunteer and the Kiwanis representative sat together and engaged each other animatedly. The Kiwanis representative had asked the mental health worker to come and give a talk to her club.

The ideas generated were extremely creative and the enthusiasm of each work group was apparent. The groups seemed to have grasped their job clearly. The other noticeable thing was that many of the ideas presented by the student researchers and the presenters had been incorporated and modified. No one suggestion had been



swallowed in its entirety, but several had been the inspiration for other ideas.

The next two meetings of the Task Force, held in May and June, focused on developing a plan for each initiative. At this stage, smaller work groups named the projects and outlined the action steps necessary to make each initiative happen. Individuals were asked to take responsibility for specific actions. Community partners were named and individual Task Force members were charged with contacting any community partners that were not on the Task Force and enlisting their support. Funding sources were identified when necessary. Although it was not the mandate of the project, before the end of the third meeting many of the initiatives were already underway. I continued to pull in community resources when I thought they might help. Task Force members began to do the same, volunteering a neighbor to help with graphic design, offering a brother-in-law's printing service, or getting a church to donate space.

Only one member expressed doubt about the Task Force's ability to carry out what we were proposing. A long-term initiative that involved serious fundraising caused some concern. The participant wondered if we were biting off more than we could chew. Wolff (2001b) speaks of the necessity of members' having faith in their ability to take on whatever issues arise. This concern was soon addressed by other members, who talked about some of their own accomplishments and their confidence that this initiative could be successfully completed.

At the last meeting, we took some time to recognize the contribution each participant had made to the goal of permanency for children in Tipp County. Each member was presented with a lapel pin commemorating the "Adoption Enhancement Task Force, Tipp County 2003." Pins were also given to key community people who had supported the project. This marked the end of a specific phase of the project and recognized that individuals had given of themselves

to support the issue of permanency for children in our county.

Also, at the last meeting the Task Force members made decisions about seed money that had been built into the grant to support community groups in taking on projects that enhanced adoption and foster care. The group decided to give the bulk of the seed money to the Family Support Network to co-sponsor an eastern regional conference of the North Carolina Foster Parents Association (NCFPA). Members were keen to take advantage of this opportunity to bring together foster and adoptive parents and begin the process of forming a branch of the NCFPA in Tipp County. The Task Force also gave some funds to Kiwanis on the condition that Kiwanis would match the funds and donate them to support foster children attending camp in Tipp County. A donation was also made to the public library in the small city in the county to enhance its holdings of books and materials related to adoption and foster care. This collection would then be available to the community and social workers could refer interested clients to the library for reading material.

The final work of the Task Force was to decide its own future. Individual members were encouraged to determine for themselves if they wanted to continue to work on the initiatives that had been started. They were also encouraged to decide as a group what the future of the Task Force should be. Although they were under no obligation, group members quickly stated that they wanted to continue to work on one or more of the initiatives. In a group discussion, several participants indicated that they thought the collective meetings were useful in providing input and support to the work groups. Because the Task Force per se had come to an end with the end of the project, it was suggested that the Task Force could become the Tipp County Community Collaborative for Adoption and Foster Care Enhancement (TCC for short). All members present heartily agreed. After some discussion, the group agreed that the TCC should meet for two hours

every other month and that the work groups should meet during the month in between. Some work groups could do their work by email or telephone. Feedback was elicited from participants who were present at the meeting in written form and through group discussion.

## The Outcomes

The Task Force selected seven initiatives and tabled one for future development. Each initiative had its own work group and one or two conveners who were responsible for calling meetings, keeping a record of what the work group was doing, and reporting back to the TCC. In some cases in which the project had to be closely allied with social services, the convener was a DSS employee. Others groups were led by community members.

The Tipp County Interfaith Committee on Permanency for Children set a goal of raising awareness and support for foster care and adoption in 12 congregations in the first year, and expanding as time went on. This initiative involved putting information in church bulletins and providing teams of speakers, both professionals and consumers, to interested churches. The materials for this project were to be provided by one of the other projects of the TCC, called Showcasing Our Kids.

Showcasing Our Kids focused on preparing generic materials, such as brochures and flyers about adoption and foster care, to meet the need for materials at awareness events. Community partners had been enlisted to help with graphics, layout, and printing. Future plans of this group called for a video and regular spots on local cable television. The goal was for this to become a recruitment vehicle for all adoption services, both public and private, in the county.

The third project encompassed the NCFPA conference in an attempt to develop supports for foster and adoptive parents in Tipp County. The conference would be used

to survey parents to see if they would like to form a branch of the NCFPA and what they would like that organization to provide. The Family Support Network agreed to be the community partner to coordinate funds for the conference. The director, who was also the only staff person, became a key player in this initiative. An MSW student on practicum with the TCC and the county grant writer teamed up to seek further funding for providing support groups for foster and adoptive parents.

Kamp for Kidz was an initiative to increase opportunities for children in foster care. Kiwanis was quick to offer to sponsor children in foster care for camp, for sport activities, and at Christmas. Kamp for Kidz formalized that effort and opened the door for donations from other sources. One Task Force member and her husband offered to sponsor one child for the summer of 2003. Another member's church offered to sponsor two foster children to their summer camp. This project was necessarily linked to DSS, as the foster care team would have to determine which children could benefit from which activity. However, the linking of a service organization and DSS was a very positive outcome and provided a model for other collaborations.

The fifth project, which was also closely linked to DSS, involved support for teens in foster care. Mental health workers, the schools, and several other community groups had been enlisted to provide monthly events for these teens, focusing on life skills, beauty and health issues, work and education opportunities, and self-esteem. Students in the Task Force who represented the Graduate Association of Social Workers at their university expressed an interest in providing "starter kits" for teens in foster care who were moving out on their own for the first time. The DSS LINKS (independent living) coordinator, a social worker in the foster care team, played a key role in this initiative. During the course of the adoption enhancement project, the need



for transitional housing for teens leaving foster care was highlighted. Although it was not one of the initiatives of the Task Force, consultation between our group and the group writing a HUD proposal spurred the county grant writer to include this need in the HUD proposal that was being put forward at that time.

The sixth and final project was a long-term initiative seeking funding for an emergency foster home for children taken into care or children whose placement breaks down. Long seen as a need in the county, the project sought to fund a facility that could receive children day or night, with trained staff who could deal with crisis and trauma. Links to other supportive services such as health and mental health would allow easy access for these children and provide any interventions that might be necessary before the children could be re-placed or to support successful placement. Corporate donors were sought for this project.

The seventh project proposed support for the purchase of a home or for renovation of an existing residence for families who were foster or adoptive parents. However, the Task Force members concluded that they had enough on their plates with the first six projects and tabled this proposal for the future.

## Was the project successful?

The project far exceeded my expectation. In the proposal I had promised one organization to make adoption awareness its focus, three community partners, and four innovative plans. We had 12 community partners, 3 of which significantly increased their commitment to this issue as their focus. We had 2 members specifically representing two churches in the Task Force, but Task Force membership came to represent 13 more churches, many of them the African-American churches I had not been able to access. We had six innovative initiatives that met the needs of Tipp County and we had work groups committed to moving those initiatives forward.

The project actually increased the assets in Tipp County by building on the resources available and connecting individuals, groups, and organizations with a commitment to a common cause. The initiatives reflected what the community constituents saw as their needs and took the directions the members had chosen. Finally, the strength of the project came from the relationships forged by the forum of the Task Force. The feedback of participants spoke to the power of community building. The social worker who had felt alone in a boat on the ocean said, "After participating in this project, I realize we are not alone in the boat. All of you are out here with us." Another participant who had worked in the field of adoption for many years said, "I can never remember ever being asked to participate in something like this to enhance adoption. I am so grateful that we were asked to be involved."

When I left the TCC to pursue other professional activities, the work groups were moving ahead and one member had agreed to act as facilitator of the TCC for the coming year. The regional director of one of the private adoption agencies had pledged meeting space for the TCC as long as they wanted it. Although there were no funds for lunches or refreshments, members rotated bringing a little breakfast to the morning meetings.

## Conclusion

Community-building techniques can be used to address child welfare issues such as adoption and foster care. Putting the principles of community building into practice can have long-lasting and far-reaching impact on a community and reduce the isolation of child welfare services and workers. However, to realize the goals set out by the Adoption Enhancement Task Force plans, several things will need to happen. Recruiting for the TCC must continue to ensure community representation and diversity (Wolff, 2001b). Sustainability must be addressed. In particular, sustaining leadership will be essential and will involve

nurturing new leadership as it emerges. The use of work-group conveners is a strategy toward that end. Although I have tried to be a facilitative and collaborative leader, other models of leadership may better suit the needs of the organization and its members at different times (Wolff, 2001b). Financial sustainability may require the coalition to adopt a more formal structure. Evaluating the Adoption Enhancement Project was easy, but evaluating the effectiveness of the ongoing coalition will be harder. The obvious measure is rate of adoption and the average length of stay in care in Tipp County. However, each initiative can be evaluated on its own terms to determine outcome. How these challenges are addressed by the organization's members will determine the long-term impact of this community-building exercise.

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