

Child Support Report

Vol. 37 No. 3 March/April 2015



VOICE BLOG

COMMISSIONER'S VOICE

“My father is in prison”: The importance of child support and justice partnerships

Millions of children in this country have grown up with a parent in prison. One in two state prisoners are parents. The data reflect strong racial disparities. One in three black men can expect to go to prison during their lifetime. One in four black children born in 1990 had a parent in jail or prison by the time the

child was 14 years old — more than double the rate of black children born in 1978, when our program was getting started.

Many experts believe that the loss of a parent due to incarceration is more complicated and painful for a child than other losses. Repeated incarceration destroys all but the strongest family relationships. Most children love their parents, miss their parents, want their parents to come home, and mourn when they are gone. Helping parents and children overcome stigma and maintain contact during incarceration can help. But a child who has lost a parent to prison may never fully get over it.

Often, children lose their primary source of financial support when their parents go to prison. Not all of this support comes through the child support program, but instead may be provided informally. Although there are exceptions, parents are generally not able to pay child support once incarcerated. After release, many owe an average of \$23,000 or more in child support. The prospects for employment are bleak for most reentering parents. Many never finished high school. The combination of limited education, limited job skills, limited job openings, and a felony conviction mean that reentering parents and the families that depend on them have little hope for steady employment. Debt from child support, fees and fines, and other debt adds to despair and pushes parents right back into the underground economy. Every door is closed.

Many child support agencies, including those featured in this issue, have begun to do something about the collateral consequences of incarceration. They reach out to parents in federal and state prisons and jails. They take affirmative steps to reduce child support orders commensurate with the parent's loss of income and inability to work. They provide tools for parents to communicate with the child support program during incarceration. They work with community partners to help children maintain contact with their incarcerated parent. They stop the clock on accrual of uncollectible debt. They provide targeted post-prison child support services, partnering with reentry, fatherhood and employment programs, and helping parents manage child support debt after prison. Opportunities for child support agencies to get involved include pre-sentence orientations, facility visits, modification, debt compromise, and connection to job services and other supports. *(continued)*

Special Edition: Incarceration and Reentry

This issue features stories, information and best practices to help child support professionals work with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated noncustodial parents and their families.

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Changing a Child Support Order State-by-State Guides

Guides to better understanding the child support review and modification process.

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Through shared objectives and promising practices, child support and justice partnerships at the federal, state, tribal, and local levels are helping incarcerated parents and their families. These partnerships promote access and communication between child support agencies and parents, provide for individualized case management, work to establish trust, and improve the likelihood of employment and reliable support for children and families. Jobs and family ties keep people from going back to prison.

This issue features several model practices to consider and a list of resources. We look forward to hearing from others about your work in this critical area.

Vicki Turetsky

Sources:

Lauren Glaze and Laura Maruschak, *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Department of Justice, rev. 2010.
Report of the Sentencing Project: *Racial Disparities in the United States Criminal Justice System*, 2013.
Sara Wakefield and Christopher Wildeman, *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality*, 2013.

List of Resources

[OCSE Reentry Web page](#): Guides, fact sheets, information memos, links to other resources.

[State by State — How to Change a Child Support Order](#): Guide and interactive map outlining child support processes in 50 states, 3 U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia.

[Working with Incarcerated and Released Parents: Lessons from OCSE Grants and State Programs](#): Projects helping parents stay connected to their children.

[FindYouthInfo.Gov — Children of Incarcerated Parents](#): Extensive list of government resources including teen pregnancy and child support.

[Little Children Big Challenges: Incarceration](#): Sesame Workshop resources for young children coping with a loved one's incarceration. Read more in "Little Children, Big Challenges" — help spread the word."

[Girl Scouts Beyond Bars](#): Program for girls ages 5-17 and their incarcerated mothers. Read more in "Supporting the children who are doing the time."

[Improving the Future for Children of Incarcerated Parents](#): Family Room Blog on federal efforts to improve the lives of children with incarcerated parents.

[Supporting Children of Incarcerated Parents](#): Family Room Blog on Commissioner Turetsky's participation on the 2014 White House panel, Children of Incarcerated Parents.

[Our focus on domestic violence survivors](#): October 2014 Commissioner's Voice Blog recognizing Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

INCARCERATION BEST PRACTICES

Two states work together

By John Clark, Program Specialist, OCSE Region III

A program that works in one state is good, but when that model is shared with other states, its potential to help grows. That is the concept behind the Region III Conference Calls on Working with the Previously Incarcerated. Each quarter, the 40 to 80 officials who call in are a mix of Pennsylvania and West Virginia state and county child support officials, workforce specialists, parole and probation officers, and OCSE Region III members. We use the calls to highlight best practices that help previously incarcerated noncustodial parents overcome their self-sufficiency barriers so they can make regular child support payments.



The February 2015 call focused on health care coverage for newly released parents. Pennsylvania Child Support Director Bob Patrick explained that in a previous job, he knew that many inmates did not have medical coverage after their release, even though almost all qualified for Medicaid. Lack of medical coverage is a major barrier to successful reentry, and a partnership between county assistance and the warden is the key to securing it. By working with county prisons and a local organization that specializes in health care for low-income consumers — the [PA Health Law Project](#) — Patrick helped deliver medical coverage to many inmates released from state jails.

Lack of medical coverage is a major barrier to successful reentry, and a partnership between county assistance and the warden is the key to securing it.

The Philadelphia Federal Detention Center reentry counselor said our February discussion was a "great conference call on what is probably one of the most pressing issues for returning citizens." West Virginia officials said they gained technical assistance to use as they develop a similar program.

During calls in October and November 2014, experts from child support, workforce programs, and federal and state probation and parole offices provided their perspectives on five key areas, and then engaged the participants in an informative and lively discussion.

The October and November 2014 discussion topics were:

- Establishing trust with previously incarcerated noncustodial parents.
- Techniques former inmates can use to overcome prison records.
- Other barriers parents face in their search for employment.
- Suggestions for starting a program with previously incarcerated noncustodial parents.
- Examples of lessons learned from working with previously incarcerated noncustodial parents.

During one call, officials from Berks County, PA, shared program models that work for their county. For example, the staff developed an ID Clinic because it is often difficult for formerly incarcerated parents to obtain valid identification. The county Domestic Relations Section wrote a child support guide specifically for previously incarcerated noncustodial parents because many are unaware of the services and benefits available to them.

Participants receive copies of the presentations to use in their counties and programs. For more information, contact John Clark, john.clark@acf.hhs.gov.

Reentry MythBusters

The Council of State Governments Justice Center has developed a series of fact sheets called Reentry MythBusters. They help clarify existing federal policies that affect formerly incarcerated individuals and their families in areas such as public housing, employment, parental rights, Medicaid suspension/termination, voting rights and more.

Visit the [Reentry Council](#) web page to find these helpful resources.

INCARCERATION BEST PRACTICES

Indiana outreach to incarcerated parents

Ellen Holland, *Indiana Child Support Bureau*

In 2014, the Indiana Child Support Bureau, Prosecuting Attorneys Council, and Department of Correction worked together to implement a program to provide incarcerated parents with consistent child support information. Their goal was to help parents incarcerated in state prison facilities navigate the child support system and understand their rights and responsibilities.

The program provides general child support information and directs parents to the correct child support office, when appropriate. The group developed several tools that all corrections facilities use now.

- A 17-minute video delivers basic information about the child support program in a question-and-answer format.
- The frequently asked questions document provides answers to topics incarcerated parents need more information on.
- Finally, a step-by-step guide shows offenders how to request child support case information. It also lists contact information for various county prosecutors' child support offices so incarcerated parents can request reviews and adjustments of their support obligations.

The Child Support Bureau will provide a 90-minute Child Support 101 class to any correctional facility at their request. Child support staff members regularly participate in correctional facility informational fairs and provide contacts for other state child support agencies whenever possible. The bureau also has an on-going collaborative relationship with the Federal Correctional Complex in Terre Haute to reach out to parents who are about to be released.



1 in 28

children has a parent behind bars

Source: [Realistic Child Support Orders for Incarcerated Parents](#) fact sheet.

Arkansas child support office honored

Paula Phillips, Policy Manager, *Arkansas Office of Child Support Enforcement*

The [Arkansas Office of Child Support Enforcement](#) recently received an award for its efforts to help formerly incarcerated parents. The [Central Arkansas ReEntry \(CARE\) Coalition](#), a group of citizens and organizations from various counties within the Central Arkansas area, helps formerly incarcerated citizens reconnect with their families and lead productive lives. In January 2015, CARE recognized individuals and governmental organizations that helped achieve this goal. CARE presented the child support office with an award based on the staff’s work helping ex-offenders meet their legal obligations. Staff members provide outreach, training, and job search assistance to parents during their incarceration and through their reentry.



Arkansas Care Coalition Champions including Dan McDonald, director of the Office of Child Support Enforcement (far right).

Incarceration resources at FindYouthInfo.Gov

Children and Teenagers can have very rough times dealing with the arrest and incarceration of a parent. Various federal agencies have brought their resources together in one place, FindYouthInfo.Gov, [Children of Incarcerated Parents](#). Find information on services and support agencies, answers to child support questions, and child welfare services.

PB&J Family Services: From preschool to full program

Mariko Thomas and Ailesha Ringer, *PB&J Family Services*



The organization that started as a small preschool for at-risk children in 1972 has grown into a program that supports the entire family. According to its website, [PB&J Family Services](#) — originally called the Peanut Butter and Jelly Therapeutic Preschool — is New Mexico’s only child abuse prevention and treatment program that works with the entire family through parenting education. While PB&J offers many services, this article focuses on its programs that help incarcerated parents reconnect with their families and successfully reenter society so they do not return to prison. In New Mexico, 1 in 28 children has a parent who is either incarcerated or on probation. The NM Department of Corrections reports that 95 percent of the incarcerated men will return to the community, but 47 percent will return to prison.

A parent’s incarceration can have far-reaching effects on the children. Executive Director Susannah Burke says, “PB&J strives to enhance the family members’ sense of self-worth and competency and help families develop the skills they need to provide safe, secure, and healthy environments for their children.” Over the years, PB&J has developed three highly successful programs to teach incarcerated men and women how to be better parents and help them build job skills they can use after prison.

Reentry program for mothers

PB&J runs a voluntary program for 50–70 mothers in the NM Women’s Correctional Facility. Months before release, the mothers participate in a 16-week parenting class. They continue with an 8-week family reintegration course covering the challenges the women might face during reentry. The mothers who have completed the parenting class and started the reintegration course can participate in structured family visits with their children.

The program also provides strictly supervised overnight visits for mothers who have completed additional program milestones. Once the woman is released, she and her family participate in weekly group therapy sessions. The families get home visits from staff members and can participate in counseling services.

Healing Hearts for mothers and dogs

In 2007, PB&J saw that incarcerated mothers had unique needs because of separation from their children. The staff also knew that many stray dogs roamed the area around the correctional facility. PB&J started [Healing Hearts](#), a therapeutic and skills training program for select inmates. A licensed therapist helps the women deal with self-awareness issues, communication problems, and other topics. A master dog groomer and trainer teaches the women how to train the dogs in basic obedience techniques and socialization skills.

The Healing Hearts program has succeeded in many ways. Participants have developed a great sense of giving back to the community. For many, their participation showed dedication and consistency, which helped them find work after release. The program has also helped them understand how to take care of themselves and their families which has reduced recidivism rates. As a bonus, the program has rescued more than 250 stray dogs, trained them, and placed them in loving homes.



PB&J employee and child clean a pickup truck

Responsible fathers stepping up for their children

The [Fathers Building Futures](#) program is a successful model for helping formerly incarcerated fathers get back on their feet. Thanks to HHS funding through a [Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood Reentry](#) grant, the program can hire the men, teach them useable skills, and give them financial management training so they can provide for their children. Staff members provide parenting classes, trauma-informed case management, and home visits to the families. This combination of services lowered recidivism rates by giving dads the tools and skills they needed to get good jobs and reconnect with their children.

As a condition of their employment, the men must pay child support. “In fact, all the fathers pay their child support 100 percent of the time,” said Dean Ma’ayan, the program director. “For many of the participants, this is the first time that they have created a child support plan and it has led to closer ties to their children and seeing themselves as responsible fathers.”

“It’s just a great chance. You can count on some money, learn how to work, be productive, see projects from start to finish — it’s great.”

The men can learn carpentry, auto-detailing, and power washing and graffiti removal. Thanks to the job training and PB&J’s outstanding reputation in the local community, the fathers find jobs more easily than their counterparts. “There are opportunities to gain employment,” said Roberto, a PB&J member. “It’s just a great chance. You can count on some money, learn how to work, be productive, see projects from start to finish — it’s great.”

Today, Vincent, another PB&J participant, has full custody of his two kids. He explained, “In my life before, I was into crime and all this stuff I shouldn’t have been doing. Now I’m a better fatherly figure, I’m in college for diesel mechanics, and I’m doing as much as I can to get as much stuff under my belt to where getting a job won’t be a problem anymore.”

Vincent and Roberto’s stories show how critical programs like this are to prepare recently incarcerated parents emotionally and financially for reentry into society. For information about the program, contact Dean Ma’ayan at dean@pbjfamilyservices.org or by phone, 505-269-3054. You can also read more in the ACF Family Room Blog, [How Grantees of Ex-Prisoner Reentry Project Work with Fathers to Strengthen Families](#).

Responsible Fatherhood grants

PB&J gets partial funding through a Responsible Fatherhood grant. The [Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation](#) (OPRE) is evaluating PB&J and other grantees over the next few years. Look for details in an upcoming *Child Support Report!*

PROGRAMS FOR INCARCERATED PARENTS

Kansas arrears forgiveness for incarcerated parents

Trisha Thomas and Tracy Davidson, *Kansas Dept. for Children and Families*

Kansas Child Support Services developed various programs and publications to help incarcerated obligors reduce their state-owed arrears, return to society, and be successful individuals and family members.

The [Incarcerated Parents and Child Support Handbook](#) helps parents understand the effect incarceration will have on their child support case. Designed for both custodial and noncustodial parents, it addresses questions regarding establishing paternity and support, enforcing and modifying court orders, and distributing payments. The handbook, written by Kansas Child Support Services, is only available through the federal website on the OCSE [State by State – How to Change a Child Support Order](#) page. Parents can access the handbook by clicking on the state of Kansas and scrolling down to page 3 of the document.



[Kansas Child Support Savings Initiative Program booklet.](#)

Kansas offers parents several ways to manage their state debt. Obligor can receive an adjustment of up to \$2,000 on state-owed arrears if they complete approved courses in prison. Every correctional facility offers the two main classes — “Parenting Inside Out” and “Active Parenting Now” — and other courses such as “Nurturing Parenting” and the “Substance Abuse Recovery Program.” The state offers additional classes for parents who have never been incarcerated or who have been released.

Kansas obligors have two additional ways to reduce their state-owed arrears. They can get a \$1,000 reduction if they obtain a GED certificate or some other type of degree. Noncustodial parents who pay into their children’s 529 college savings plans can also reduce their arrearages by \$1.00 for every \$2.00 contribution.

PROGRAMS TO HELP CHILDREN

‘Little Children, Big Challenges’ — help spread the word

Kim Danek, *OCSE*

Young children are often the ones most affected by negative family events such as divorce and incarceration. They can have the hardest time dealing with the circumstances and their feelings. Adults may not know how to speak to young children in ways the children will understand. Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit organization behind [Sesame Street](#), has developed a series of resources called [Little Children, Big Challenges](#) that can be very helpful in these situations. These resources are all an extension of the Workshop’s mission to help kids grow smarter, stronger, and kinder.

Dr. Jeanette Betancourt, the senior vice president for Community and Family Engagement at Sesame Workshop, describes why they developed the series. “These resources came about as part of a comprehensive program we started with our military families. Very few resources existed for situations like returning from deployment or other difficult transitions military families face.” When they developed resources to help military children deal with grief for a parent who did not return, the team realized that the topic could be helpful to families outside the military as well. “Following up on that, there were other tough topics that large numbers of families with young children face — such as divorce and incarceration — that could be developed. These resources grew into a series called Little Children, Big Challenges,” says Betancourt.

The team designed the resources for families with children ages 3-8 along with support materials for service providers. Sesame Workshop partners with many national and local organizations to help service providers understand how to use these resources to reach families and their children. The Workshop gets an excellent response from people who know about the packages, particularly the mobile apps.



Unfortunately, many organizations, such as child support agencies, may not be aware of these comprehensive resources. “We find that the service providers who work directly with those parents are better at disseminating the information. They are the trusted source that can model communication strategies to help children understand what is happening and feel comforted,” explained Betancourt.

This is a list of resources in the [Incarceration](#) collection (the [Divorce](#) kit is similar).

- Multimedia resource kit: features a DVD, a children’s storybook, and a guide for parents and caregivers (see a [2-minute excerpt of the Incarceration DVD](#)).
- Mobile app designed for children: available for tablets and mobile phones through the Apple iTunes store, the Amazon Appstore, and Google Play™.
- [YouTube videos](#) featuring ‘Little Children, Big Challenges’ topics.
- [Facebook.com/SesameStreetInCommunities](#): Sesame Street’s free educational resources for adults.
- Incarceration [tip sheet](#).
- Downloadable versions of all [print materials](#).

Providers can go directly to the collections to learn how to use the resources including the mobile apps. Parents can also download materials from the website. OCSE is working with the staff at Sesame Workshop to help make virtual training available to child support workers and others.



LITTLE children
BIG challenges: incarceration

PROGRAMS TO HELP CHILDREN

Supporting the children who are doing the time

Nancy Mathieson, Program Specialist, OCSE Region X

Through my work with a community partnership network in the Upper Northwest, I have seen programs designed to help incarcerated parents, but I wondered whether there were local efforts to help their children. In December 2014, I volunteered for just such a program, the annual [Celebrate Kids](#) holiday event in Seattle. Guardians who brought kids — a mix of parents, grandparents, foster parents, and other family members — said the event’s value went far beyond the crafts, carnival games, great food, and gift-giving. It showed the children they were not alone. By attending the fun, child-focused event, the children could admit two things they cannot generally talk about with others — they have a parent who is incarcerated and it is not their fault. Celebrate Kids also gave each one an opportunity to feel special.

“Children of incarcerated parents are doing the time, even though they didn’t do the crime.”

During my research for this article and my discussions with parents, children, and adults who grew up with parents in prison, I learned why it is so important to support events that connect these kids with peers who understand. One of the phrases that hit home to me was that, “Children of incarcerated parents are doing the time, even though they didn’t do the crime.”

Children may display normal behavior and be successful in school, but they often internalize conflict. One incarcerated mother told me how concerned she was when her daughter wrote in her journal about her feelings of unworthiness and hopelessness. This motivated the mom to enroll her family in the [Girl Scouts Beyond Bars Program](#). It brought them closer together and created a bond between the girls, the mothers, and the troop leaders. The daughter got so much out of it that she wanted to continue working with the younger girls in the program.

Many of the participants got another benefit from the experience. When daughters visited prisons for the troop meetings, they saw their mothers in a place full of rules and restrictions. When they saw firsthand that their mothers were not having fun, the girls understood that prison is not a good place to live.

Several parents also acknowledged that being honest was better than trying to insulate the child by saying the parents were away on vacation or going to college. The adults thought they were sparing the child from shame but this generally had the opposite effect. The children felt lied to or betrayed.

One of the mothers that I spoke to was a peer trainer in a program called “Parenting Behind Bars.” She encourages parents who are entering prison to answer the five questions below for their children:

- 1 Where are you?
- 2 Why are you there?
- 3 How long will you be gone?
- 4 Is it my fault?
- 5 Do you still love me?

Everyone I spoke to was grateful for all of these programs and the lasting relationships they built. Now that the parents are back in their communities, they are committed to making a difference and providing outreach to similar families. I am convinced that these efforts are an important investment in the futures of these children and their families.

Vice President at National Conference on Health and Domestic Violence

“All of you in this room who are doctors, nurses, researchers, social workers from all across the country, the fact that we are talking today about domestic violence as a public health epidemic is because of you. We have come such a long way in our fight against this epidemic, but we have to keep making the case even stronger for prevention and intervention.” – Vice President Joe Biden

More information about his appearance is available in the March 24 [FuturesWithoutViolence.Org blog](#) and from Huffington Post, [Joe Biden: Domestic Violence Is A ‘Public Health Epidemic’](#). The [October 2014 Child Support Report](#) and the OCSE [Family Violence](#) webpage feature additional programs and resources.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Georgia college students have their ‘first’ graduation

Mae Holt, Internship Coordinator, Georgia DCSS

In July 2014, the Georgia Division of Child Support Services (DCSS) launched a pilot Internship Program because the leadership believed that strong internship opportunities could develop future employees. The first major goal was to let college students experience state government by working with child support professionals. They also wanted to expose the students to careers serving Georgia families.

The nine students gave a variety of reasons for participating — meeting college graduation requirements, obtaining academic credits, and gaining real world, hands-on work experience. Each intern performed duties in support positions such as program assistant, legal secretary, and child support agent during the fall semester. At the end of the program, they had performed more than 3,200 volunteer hours in four child support field offices.

DCSS held its Internship Program graduation ceremony in December 2014 in Atlanta. Deputy Director Reed Kimbrough said he was very impressed with the quality of the interns and by their self-sacrifice, determination, and hard work. “Many of the interns overcame obstacles, juggled jobs, their studies, cared for families, and handled other responsibilities while volunteering.”

Graduate Kate Chukwu said, “The program greatly impacted my knowledge of public service and has also encouraged me to keep pursuing a career in the public sector in order to continue to impact lives on a larger scale.” Even though she was still working on her master’s degree in public administration, she applied for and got a position as a child support agent in the Canton field office.

“Being in the Internship Program gave Ms. Chukwu the knowledge she needed to be successfully employed with DCSS,” said Canton Manager Sherry Riner. “It also gave DCSS proof of her dedication and willingness to work hard. It was a win-win for DCSS.”



Georgia DCSS staff and interns.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Arizona encourages education with arrears forgiveness

Bianca Varelas, Process Improvement Manager, Arizona Division of Child Support Services

Sometimes it can be hard to get noncustodial parents in the door because they do not feel that child support offices have their best interests in mind. The assistant director of Arizona's Division of Child Support Services challenged his employees to find better ways to serve this group of customers. A coalition of child support professionals and community partners met to create a new set of principles for the program. One was to engage the noncustodial parent in a more innovative, holistic, and respectful way.

The group wanted to develop new state programs that would help eliminate the barriers that prevent parents from paying child support. They created the concept of a three-pronged Arrears Forgiveness program that consists of a Hardship Forgiveness Program, a Consistent Payor Program, and Personal Development Initiatives. Change takes time, so they are starting small and will build as they go.

Recognizing that lack of education is a key barrier to consistent employment and ultimately child support payments, the coalition developed the [General Education Development \(GED\) Back-To-School Incentive Program](#). The child support office encourages noncustodial parents to complete a GED program so that they can apply for a \$1,000 waiver of state-assigned arrears. The state rolled out the program in July 2014, so it is too early to know how many people have enrolled.

They are counting on this initial Personal Development Initiative program to bring noncustodial parents into child support offices so staff can start conversations. Does the order need adjusting? Is getting a job an issue? Are additional referrals required? Arizona encourages child support staff to identify additional programs and community partners that can help parents become consistent child support payers. While this is a definite goal, the staff hopes that, in the end, customers will forge healthier family relationships.

See the [Arizona Child Support Services](#) homepage and the GED Back-To-School program [flyer](#) for more information.

CSPED grantee featured in ACF blog

The ACF Family Room Blog recently featured an article about the Reliable Employment and Child Support Help, or REACH, program. The Iowa Department of Human Services Child Support Program and the Evelyn K. Davis Center receive funding through an OCSE grant program. Find out more in [REACH-ing His Potential in Polk County, Iowa](#).

Project to Avoid Increasing Delinquencies (PAID) Fact Sheets

OCSE has a series of fact sheets that discuss activities that increase the regular payments of current child support and prevent and reduce arrears. The sheets highlight ways to set realistic child support orders for incarcerated parents and methods child support programs have used to improve modification and adjustment processes. A companion chart to the series outlines practices, laws, and policies in different jurisdictions related to child support orders for incarcerated parents. See the PAID fact sheets on the [OCSE Reentry webpage](#).

Child Support Report

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