



RETHINKING EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS:

A NEW PARADIGM FOR LOCAL AND GLOBAL IMPACT

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PARTNERSHIP

> EDUCATION ACCELERATED AND GRADED - THE AMERICAN SCHOOL OF SÃO PAULO

The following case study highlights how Education Accelerated empowers educational communities worldwide to build momentum and scale for positive, lasting innovation. Our ongoing partnership with Graded – The American School of São Paulo exemplifies this commitment. Together, we have designed, facilitated, and implemented the 2024 Think Tank, an initiative that has already delivered demonstrable results for students, faculty, and parents.

This work is not just about one school's progress; it's about creating replicable systems and practices that can be adapted, scaled, and shared across the broader educational sector. We believe that true innovation flourishes when insights are exchanged and communities work together to reimagine what education can be.

We're excited to share our reflections and invite you to explore how this approach might benefit your community.

Let's build the future of education—together.

David B. Palumbo

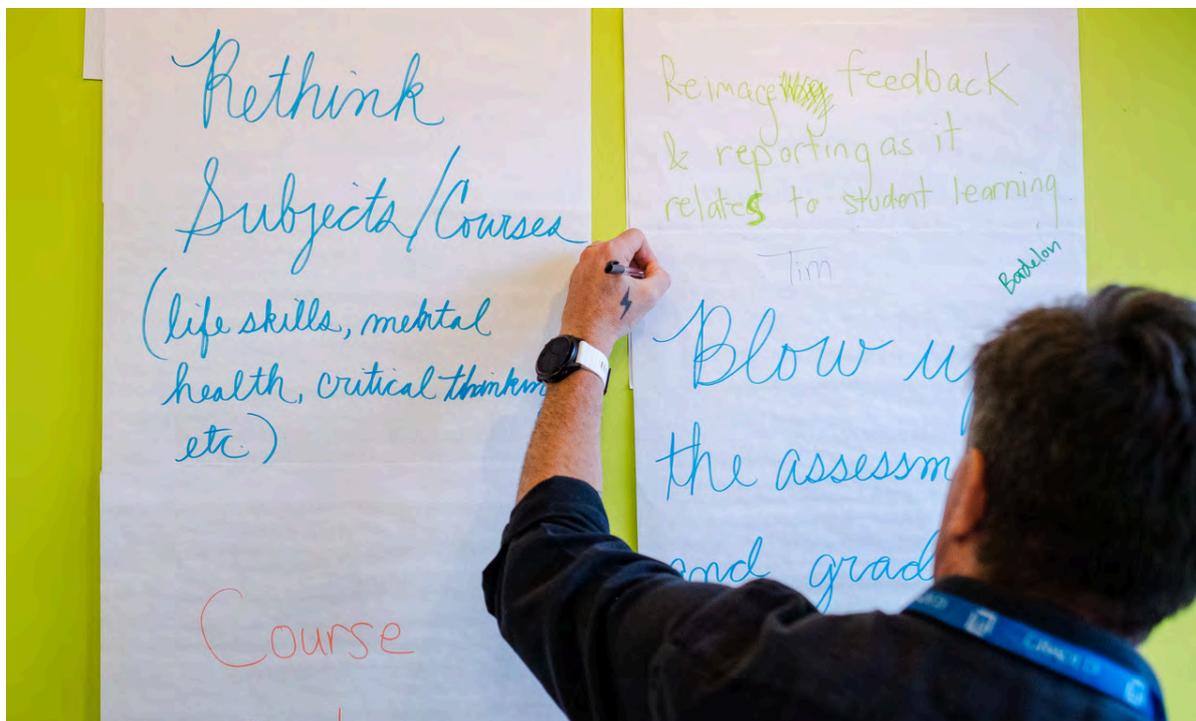
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Education Accelerated

February 2025

INTRODUCTION

Discussing educational progress has been a recurring theme for at least five centuries. Yet, operationalizing significant or promising improvements—whether on a global or local scale—presents a formidable challenge, one that transcends the mere adoption of innovative ideas. It requires a deep and nuanced understanding of the systemic, human, and contextual factors that drive change. For reforms to be both successful and scalable, they must be underpinned by robust frameworks that accommodate the complexities of real-world application and demand sustained commitment from all stakeholders. This comprehensive approach helps ensure that educational transformations are not only conceptualized but also effectively operationalized, implemented, evaluated, and sustained over time (Fullan, 2007).



Think Tank 2.0 at Graded - The American School of São Paulo, April 2024

“EDUCATION IS THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON WHICH YOU CAN USE TO CHANGE THE WORLD.”

~ NELSON MANDELA

THE NEED FOR MOMENTUM

> COMPLEX STAKEHOLDER DYNAMICS AND RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Operationalizing and sustaining educational reforms have been hindered from the outset by the complex web of stakeholder interests. Achieving significant and long-term change requires careful, consistent, and comprehensive alignment among diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, administrators, funders, employers, educators, parents, and students. Each group has its own priorities and concerns, often leading to conflicts that can derail reform efforts, particularly when initiatives scale beyond small, locally controlled projects. Effective alignment necessitates ongoing communication to clearly articulate the benefits and manage the inevitable trade-offs of new educational strategies. This process demands a context-sensitive approach that respects local educational cultures and individual school environments, making stakeholder engagement both strategic and adaptive (Bryk et al., 2015).

“THE GREATEST ENEMY OF PROGRESS IS NOT STAGNATION, BUT FALSE PROGRESS.”

~ SYDNEY J. HARRIS

Resistance to change within any large system is a significant barrier, deeply embedded across multiple dimensions. In education, this resistance often stems from a preference for what might be called “the school I went to,” an overemphasis on the value of traditional teaching methods, the risk-averse nature of K-12 and higher education institutions, and the daunting prospect of disruption that large-scale change entails. Moreover, change in education is not merely a logistical challenge but a cultural shift, requiring a fundamental rethinking of deeply entrenched beliefs and practices that shape current paradigms. Overcoming this resistance requires strategic interventions that address both the structural and psychological aspects of change within the entire educational infrastructure (Sarason, 1996).

> SCALABILITY OF INNOVATIONS

“INNOVATION DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN A LEADER AND A FOLLOWER.”

~ STEVE JOBS

Scaling innovations from small-scale “proof point” projects to broader applications is a critical and complex challenge. Such pilot projects often thrive in controlled environments with exceptional funding and concentrated resources—conditions that are difficult to replicate across larger systems. Attempts to scale these innovations must navigate diverse educational landscapes, each shaped by unique socioeconomic conditions, resource constraints, and local policies. Importantly, scaling in this context is not merely replication at a larger scale but rather achieving depth, sustainability, spread, and ownership. This requires developing flexible, adaptable implementation strategies that accommodate local variations without diluting the core objectives of educational innovation (Coburn, 2003).



> LESSONS FROM A ‘BLACK SWAN’ EVENT: COVID-19 AND ITS TEMPORARY TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT ON EDUCATION

“IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS, THERE IS ALSO OPPORTUNITY.”

~ SUN TZU

The COVID-19 pandemic was a quintessential ‘Black Swan’ event for the education sector—an unpredictable and severe disruption with widespread consequences. This global crisis led to the immediate closure of educational institutions, impacting over 1.2 billion students worldwide. The urgent need to maintain continuity catalyzed a wave of forced innovation, particularly through the rapid adoption of online and hybrid learning models that upended traditional practices. These innovations resulted in enhanced critical thinking, student agency, and problem-solving skills among students, demonstrating the potential for rapid educational transformation in response to global challenges (Zhao, 2020).

Despite the groundbreaking innovations and rapid adaptability demonstrated by educational systems worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic, a disheartening trend has emerged in the aftermath. As the immediate crisis receded, many schools experienced a widespread and troubling reversion to traditional practices. This regression undermines the progress made during the pandemic, where schools embraced digital tools and online and hybrid learning models, demonstrating their potential to enhance accessibility and foster more personalized learning (Zhao, 2020). The fading momentum for these transformative approaches reflects a persistent adherence to outdated models that may no longer meet the needs of a diverse and technologically advanced student population. The return to pre-pandemic norms has not only stalled potential educational advancements but also risks forfeiting the significant investments made in digital infrastructure and teacher training during the pandemic (Cuban, 2021).

Such reversions highlight the challenge of overcoming systemic inertia within educational institutions and raise critical questions about our collective commitment to evolving educational paradigms in response to global challenges and opportunities (Fullan, 2021). Despite the rapid advancements in educational methods during the pandemic, sustaining these innovations remains a significant challenge, requiring continuous investment and invention. The initial enthusiasm for digital tools and novel teaching methodologies has begun to wane, exacerbated by fatigue associated with prolonged periods of remote learning. Moreover, the inherent structural and systemic inertia of the education system—characterized by standardized curricula, traditional assessment methods, and entrenched institutional habits—further complicates the permanent adoption of new educational practices. Overcoming these barriers requires a concerted effort to integrate these innovations into the regular operational fabric of educational systems (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

RETHINKING STRATEGIC PLANNING IN EDUCATION: A SHIFT TOWARDS THE THINK TANK MODEL

Strategic planning in education has historically served as a foundational tool for setting long-term goals and outlining the steps needed to achieve them. Emerging in the mid-20th century, it provided educational institutions with structured methods to address growth, curriculum development, and resource allocation. This traditional approach, influenced by corporate planning models, emphasized comprehensive analysis, extensive stakeholder engagement, and detailed action plans. While effective in a relatively stable environment, this model now faces significant limitations amid rapid technological advancements, evolving educational needs, and the demand for swift, impactful innovation. In sum, strategic planning should not be confused with strategic thinking.

“IF YOU WANT SOMETHING NEW, YOU HAVE TO STOP DOING SOMETHING OLD.”

~ PETER F. DRUCKER

> HISTORY OF STRATEGIC PLANNING IN EDUCATION

Gaining prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, educational strategic planning paralleled a similar rise as the business sector. Educational institutions began adopting strategic planning to systematically address challenges such as demographic shifts, budget constraints, and curriculum modernization. Early frameworks, such as those proposed by Kenneth H. Hoover in his seminal works, focused on rational, step-by-step processes aimed at aligning institutional objectives with available resources and emerging opportunities. By the 1980s and 1990s, strategic planning had become a staple of educational administration, with schools and universities routinely engaging in multi-year planning cycles to ensure long-term stability and growth.

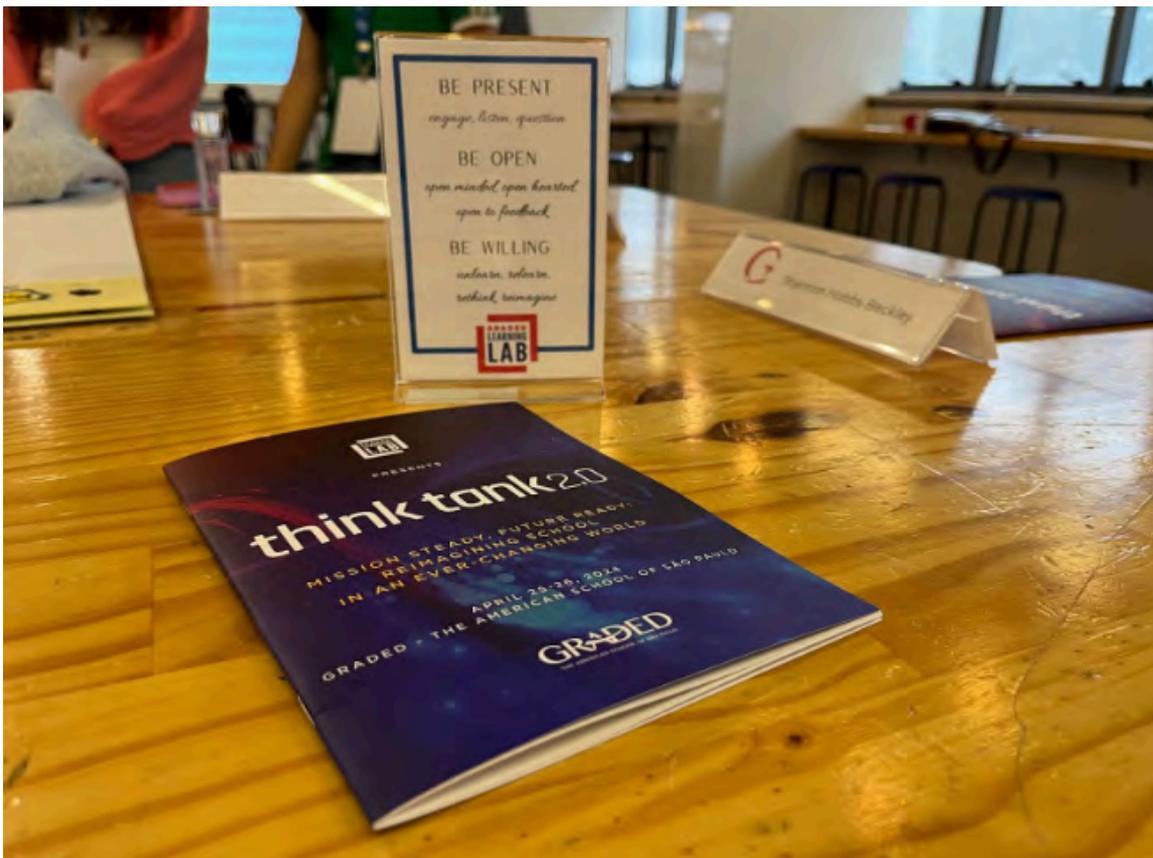
Again, the goal of these engagements, conducted with a significant amount of meeting time and consensus-building, was to drive a process aimed at achieving traditional results on typical metrics of educational success. There was little opportunity for exploration, innovation, or thinking outside the box; the focus was not on doing things differently but merely on doing things better.

> LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL STRATEGIC PLANNING

Despite its historical utility, traditional strategic planning is increasingly seen as inadequate in today's educational landscape, which demands greater agility and immediate responsiveness. Challenged by rigidity, inflexibility, slow decision-making, limited innovation, and exclusionary practices, we must consider a new model.

In response to these limitations and with an eye toward collaborative acceleration, we propose a new model for educational strategic planning: the Think Tank approach. Designed to be faster, more inclusive, action-oriented, and impact-driven, this model prioritizes agility and meaningful change.

> A NEW MODEL: THE THINK TANK APPROACH



Think Tank 2.0 at Graded - The American School of São Paulo, April 2024

The evolving demands of the educational landscape require a shift from traditional strategic planning to more dynamic, inclusive, and impact-driven approaches. The Think Tank model offers a promising alternative capable of fostering innovation and responsiveness in educational institutions. By embracing this new paradigm, educators and administrators can better meet the needs of their communities and prepare for the challenges of the future.

“THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN THE BEAUTY OF THEIR DREAMS.”

~ ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

THINK TANK MODEL	TRADITIONAL STRATEGIC PLANNING
<p>Agility and Flexibility: Emphasizes short, iterative planning cycles that allow for rapid adaptation and course correction in response to new information and changing circumstances.</p>	<p>Rigidity and Inflexibility: Often span several years, making adaptation to sudden changes or unexpected challenges difficult.</p>
<p>Inclusive Participation: It actively involves a broad range of stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, community leaders, and industry experts, ensuring diverse perspectives and collaborative decision-making.</p>	<p>Exclusionary Practices: Involves a limited number of stakeholders, often excluding voices from diverse and underrepresented communities.</p>
<p>Action-Oriented Focus: The model prioritizes immediate action and tangible outcomes over extensive preliminary analysis, encouraging experimentation and real-time problem-solving.</p>	<p>Limited Innovation: The methodical nature of traditional planning can stifle creativity and innovation by prioritizing proven strategies over experimental approaches.</p>
<p>Impact-Driven: Focus on achieving measurable outcomes, with continuous evaluation and feedback loops to assess progress and refine strategies.</p>	<p>Slow Decision-Making: Extensive data collection, analysis, and consensus-building processes can delay implementation, hindering timely responses to urgent needs.</p>

> FORMALIZING A CALL TO ACTION

In his insightful book, *The Advantage*, Patrick Lencioni presents six fundamental questions that any organization or initiative must answer to achieve clarity and coherence in its mission. These questions are not only crucial for business success but also serve as a structured framework that can be adeptly applied to ambitious, large-scale educational initiatives.

1. WHY DO WE EXIST?

This initiative exists to fundamentally reshape the educational landscape with and for schools and organizations, preparing future generations to thrive in an increasingly complex, technologically advanced world. Our mission extends beyond traditional educational goals; it is about equipping learners with the skills, mindset, and adaptability needed for lifelong success and societal contributions.

2. HOW DO WE BEHAVE?

Our work is guided by the principles of inclusivity, innovation, and integrity. We are committed to a collaborative approach, drawing on diverse perspectives and expertise across various fields to ensure that our strategies are comprehensive and culturally responsive.

3. WHAT DO WE DO?

We support the overhaul, transformation, and growth of more effective educational models that foster environments emphasizing critical thinking and problem-solving. Our actions will reflect our dedication to creating equitable and accessible learning experiences for all.

4. HOW WILL WE SUCCEED?

Success hinges on our ability to integrate interdisciplinary knowledge and foster partnerships among key stakeholders, creating synergy and a shared vision for educational improvement. By leveraging technology, evidence-based teaching practices, and community involvement, we can build educational models that are both scalable and sustainable.

5. WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW?

The immediate priority is to establish clear, actionable plans that align with and support a long-term vision for fundamental change. This includes securing funding, forming strategic alliances, and identifying key levers that demonstrate the efficacy of our proposed changes.

6. WHO MUST DO WHAT?

Clearly defined roles and responsibilities are crucial. We need leaders to drive policy changes, educators to embrace and implement new teaching methods, technologists to develop innovative learning tools, and community stakeholders to provide ongoing support and feedback.

> OUR THINK TANK MODEL: FIRST STEPS ON A PATH FORWARD

To explore the feasibility of designing and delivering an initiative like the one envisioned above, in April 2024, Graded - The American School of São Paulo (Graded) hosted Think Tank 2.0: Reimagining School in an Ever-Changing World. During this two-day event, students, parents, educators, administrators, board members, industry executives, and thought leaders from around the world convened for investigative conversations about the future of schooling. The thought leaders brought expertise on topics such as the science of learning, research, assessment, inclusion, belonging, curriculum and instruction, technology and artificial intelligence, leadership, and human resources.



Think Tank 2.0 at Graded - The American School of São Paulo, April 2024

The Think Tank concept, as an alternative to typical strategic planning initiatives, was not new to the Graded community. Beginning in 2019, the school approached innovation in teaching and learning with a Think Tank-like engagement model, the focus of which was to bring advances in educational neuroscience into practice throughout the school.

“EDUCATION IS NOT THE FILLING OF A PAIL, BUT THE LIGHTING OF A FIRE.”

~ WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Since the school’s inaugural Think Tank in 2019, the world has undergone significant change. In an effort to prepare students for this ever-changing world, Graded has invested in deeper learning, providing comprehensive faculty training and integrating instructional practices rooted in cognitive science into classrooms. Deeper learning enhances students’ ability to think critically, collaborate, ideate, communicate, and problem-solve. Perhaps most importantly, it empowers learners to transfer these essential skills to other aspects of their lives, extending well beyond the classroom.

As the world grows more complex and tomorrow’s careers become increasingly uncertain, schools must embrace characteristics like adaptability and agility while striving to be forward-thinking. This drive for innovation motivated the second, more broadly focused Think Tank initiative at Graded.

Kindergarteners today will graduate from high school in 2036 (assuming they follow a traditional year-to-year school model)! What awaits them? Schools and leaders must address students’ immediate needs staying attuned to the emerging trends and demands of the future workforce. Think Tank 2.0 allowed participants to imagine and explore ways to advance learning— learning that ensures relevance, value, and purpose both today and for years to come. This iteration of the Think Tank was a two-day, in-person workshop that utilized Education Accelerated’s Fusion Innovative Planning Process.



Participants first looked at the historical arc of collective efforts in integrating advances in educational neuroscience into Graded's teaching and learning practices. They then broadened their focus, brainstorming what “could be” in order to create a more impactful future for all learners on a global scale. From that brainstorm, they prioritized a list of eight emerging themes with the potential to significantly impact learners at the school.

Using a framework loosely based on Lencioni’s six critical questions, we provided a structured and effective approach to addressing complex challenges. The Think Tank participants convened in small groups, each ideating on one of the eight emerging themes. The mixed-stakeholder groups spent one day answering each of Lencioni’s questions, allowing participants to deeply engage with every aspect of the initiative’s purpose and strategy.

As each small group shared their insights, the connections among topics grew even stronger. This shared understanding underscored the need for a bold, transformative initiative—one that reimagines schooling and ensures its continued relevance in our rapidly changing world.

Throughout the two-day event, we intentionally prioritized lifting students’ voices in every conversation. Empowering students to advocate for their own futures and needs proved to be a powerful way to ground all adult participants in purpose and relevance. The students did not disappoint—they spoke candidly, challenged traditional educational conventions, and questioned the status quo.



Eight themes that emerged as participants envisioned the future of education.

Our experience in planning, delivering, and acting on the outcomes of Think Tank 2.0 has shown both the power and promise of an approach that unites the right people—with the right mindset and the right engagement model—to drive significant change. Through an extremely efficient and effective process, we honored our past and progress to date, gained a clear and honest understanding of our current state through a focused local lens, and advanced an agenda to develop a roadmap of the most valuable and actionable initiatives, projects, and programs that well-informed teams can build upon. This roadmap not only incorporates insights from a global network of experts but also highlights opportunities for local, personalized solutions. At every stage of the Think Tank, participants felt confident in contributing their perspectives from the roles they best represented. They also engaged in discussions, questioned assumptions, and added value to other groups as they shared and refined their roadmaps for various initiatives.



Think Tank 2.0 at Graded - The American School of São Paulo, April 2024

CONCLUSION

> ENVISIONING A TRANSFORMATIVE FUTURE FOR EDUCATION

"WE CANNOT SOLVE OUR PROBLEMS WITH THE SAME THINKING WE USED WHEN WE CREATED THEM."

~ ALBERT EINSTEIN

Education stands at a pivotal moment—demanding bold, collaborative action. Just as the Human Genome Project unlocked the blueprint of human biology through unprecedented international cooperation, we now need an **Educational Genome Project** to map the essential elements of transformative learning worldwide.

This initiative calls for cross-disciplinary collaboration among educators, researchers, policymakers, and industry leaders to identify the "DNA" of effective educational innovation. Pursuing isolated reforms or short-term initiatives is not enough. We must decode what truly drives impactful learning, creating a shared understanding that can be adapted, scaled, and sustained across diverse educational contexts.

The Human Genome Project succeeded because it combined visionary ambition with meticulous execution, powered by the collective expertise of scientists worldwide. Likewise, transforming education requires us to:

- **Collaborate globally:** Break down silos and unite stakeholders across disciplines.
- **Embrace complexity:** Recognize that educational transformation, like genetic discovery, is multifaceted and context-specific.
- **Ensure inclusivity:** Make educational innovation accessible and relevant to all communities, not just those with abundant resources.
- **Prioritize action:** Move beyond planning to experimentation, iteration, and measurable progress.

This is more than an opportunity—it is an obligation. If we can map the core drivers of educational success, we can build more resilient, adaptive learning ecosystems that prepare all students for an uncertain future.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how quickly education systems can innovate under pressure, but the return to traditional practices has shown how fragile progress can be without sustained commitment. We must not let this moment slip away. The time has come to channel that same urgency into a structured, intentional effort—one that is collaborative, inclusive, and action-oriented.

Together, we can achieve a breakthrough—not just for one school, one district, or one country, but for education globally. Like the Human Genome Project, this initiative can illuminate pathways for transformation, ensuring that every learner, everywhere, has access to the knowledge, skills, and opportunities they deserve. This initiative transcends borders, inviting educators, leaders, and innovators worldwide to unite in transforming learning for all.

The time to act is now. We have the tools, expertise, and collective will to drive meaningful change. By working together across borders, disciplines, and communities, we can build an education system that not only meets today's challenges but also shapes tomorrow's opportunities. This is our chance to leave a lasting legacy—an educational system designed for the future, empowering every learner to reach their full potential.



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