

# Leveraging Student Voice Data for Meaningful Change

## GUIDE 3

Partnering  
with Students



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Series: <i>From Data to Impact</i>	03
Why Partner With Students?	06
A Teacher's Perspective: Ms. Stewart's Story	07
Principles for Partnering with Students Around Data	09
– Principle 1: Use Surveys to Objectively Assess Priorities and Progress	
– Principle 2: Supplement Surveys with Generative Dialogue	
– Principle 3: Show Students That You Are Taking Action	
Acknowledgements	19
References	20

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# About the Series:

## *From Data to Impact*

**RESEARCH IS CLEAR:** young people learn best when schools afford them key experiences, like a sense of belonging,<sup>1-7</sup> schoolwork that feels meaningful and personally relevant,<sup>8-12</sup> and the sense that adults in the building believe in them.<sup>13-15</sup> Experiences like these are now taking their rightful place at the center of school and district leaders' strategic visions.

As a result, schools increasingly measure how their students experience school climate, classroom learning conditions, and academic mindsets.<sup>16, 17</sup> These distinct experiences all support the emergence of positive outcomes. Furthermore, the widespread availability of validated instruments for collecting such student experience data represents an enormous advance towards a more evidence-based education system that better serves young people.

“This class has gotten much better since the beginning of the year and I feel as if this is one of my more likable classes now. [My teacher] has done a great job of listening to our suggestions to make this class better for everyone. I also think we learn more than every other class.”

— A high school student reflecting on their experience providing student voice data

Yet the potential of such data is in danger of going unrealized unless the systematic measurement of student experience is accompanied by systematic action. For student experience to improve, the data collected through surveys should inform meaningful changes in the practices, policies, and cultures that students encounter in school. Unfortunately, student surveys are often implemented without an action plan. Consequently, they too often result in discussion with little action.<sup>17</sup>

### ***From Data to Impact*** **Leveraging Student Voice Data for Meaningful Change**

**This field guide series** distills our learning into a practical resource for schools, districts, and policymakers to effect meaningful transformation in student experience:

#### GUIDE 1

#### Setting the Foundation

Design an *improvement process* to effect meaningful change with your student experience data.

#### GUIDE 2

#### Supporting the Adults

Create a culture that supports *adults* to confront challenging issues raised by student experience data.

#### GUIDE 3

#### Partnering with Students

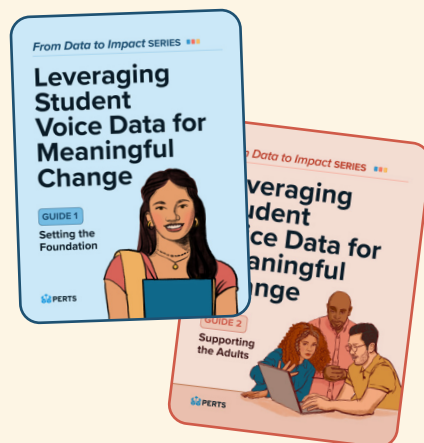
Bring students in as partners in the improvement process.

Fortunately, *it is possible* to improve student experience systematically. PERTS has been honored to be part of a growing community of schools, districts, researchers, nonprofits, and funders who are working together to develop practical approaches for improving student experience (see [Acknowledgements](#)).

## REFRESHER ON KEY TERMS

The first two guides in the *From Data to Impact Series* discuss how to do improvement cycles with student voice data (*Guide 1: Setting the Foundation*), and how to support adults with the vulnerability of engaging in this work (*Guide 2: Supporting the Adults*). We define a few key terms from these Guides below:

- **Improvement Cycle** refers to the cycle of inquiry and action depicted below.
- **Changemaker** refers to any person in an education system who is working to improve students' experiences.
- **Elevate Network** refers to a national network of schools, districts, researchers, and nonprofits across the country using the [Elevate platform](#) ([perts.net/elevate](https://perts.net/elevate)) to improve student experiences. The series draws heavily on learnings from the network.



### KEY TERMS

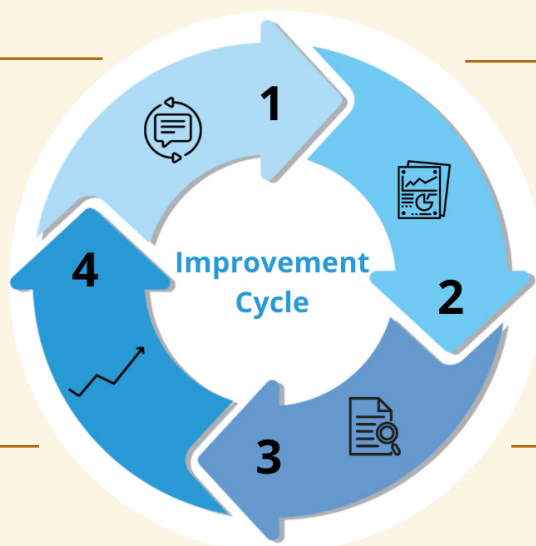
For a more comprehensive description of key terms and their importance in improvement efforts, consult [Field Guide 1: Setting the Foundation](#). ([perts.net/data-to-impact-1-pdf](https://perts.net/data-to-impact-1-pdf)) and [Field Guide 2: Supporting the Adults](#) ([perts.net/data-to-impact-2-pdf](https://perts.net/data-to-impact-2-pdf)).

### COLLECT DATA

Use a validated instrument to gather data about students' experiences.

### IMPROVE & REPEAT

Implement selected practices. Then start a new cycle to assess impact & keep growing.



### REFLECT ON FEEDBACK

Changemakers reflect on data to learn how they might impact students' experiences.

### SELECT NEW PRACTICES

Changemakers select new practices in consultation with students, colleagues, and other resources.

Drawing on insights from our work in the Elevate Network, Guide 3 highlights key principles for partnering with students to utilize student experience data for improvement:

- **Why partnering with students is important**
- **Impactful practices (and pitfalls) of partnering with students**

While these learnings came from the Elevate Network, we believe they will benefit any group of changemakers who hope to create positive impacts on student experience.

## **HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE**

Drawing on insights from our work in the Elevate Network, Guide 3 explores why partnering with students is important and offers effective practices (and pitfalls) in making these partnerships impactful. This guide highlights three key principles in partnering with students to utilize student experience data for improvement:

**PRINCIPLE 1 Use Surveys to Objectively Assess Priorities and Progress**

**PRINCIPLE 2 Supplement Surveys with Generative Dialogue**

**PRINCIPLE 3 Show Students That You Are Taking Action**

# Why Partner With Students?

**WHEN EDUCATION LEADERS** resolve to collect student voice data, they generally have a vision of empowering students and creating more enthusiastic learners. And well-conceived student voice efforts can absolutely have this effect. Consider the experience of U.S. high school student Kanaan Smith:

“

When I first did [the Elevate survey], I thought it was stupid... But once I learned that it would be used to improve the classroom, I took it more seriously... Rarely do you have a teacher that is willing to give power to the students of what they want to learn or how they want to grow. And the reason I said power is because that ‘power’ is rare... Having a teacher that’s willing to teach that way is not common. It should be common, but it’s not.

As a student, it felt empowering in the sense that we usually don’t get that type of attention. We don’t get to choose what we learn, we just learn it. So...that’s why I would call it power. Having that power makes you feel like you’re important, it makes you feel like you’re loved, it makes you feel like you’re protected in the school environment.”

— Kanaan Smith, U.S. high school student



[Listen to Kanaan’s story](https://perts.net/elevate/stories/kanaan)

([perts.net/elevate/stories/kanaan](https://perts.net/elevate/stories/kanaan))

Kanaan Smith’s experience illustrates how impactful it can be for young people to have a voice in their education. However, creating the space for this sense of voice to develop is not simple. We’ve found in the Elevate Network that student voice efforts are most empowering when educators create genuine *partnerships with students* to guide their learning and action from student voice data. The remainder of this Guide discusses what the Elevate Network has learned about how to create these partnerships.

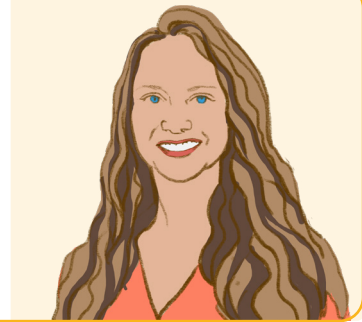
# A Teacher's Perspective: Ms. Stewart's Story

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**TO UNDERSTAND** what an empowering partnership around student voice data looks like from a teacher's perspective, consider the story of Ms. Anna Stewart, a teacher at Yulee Middle School. At the start of the school year, Ms. Stewart was at a critical point in her career: after 20 years of teaching, she was considering leaving the profession. She shared:

“ I was being strong for the teachers, I was being strong for the students, and at the end of the day, I was going home overwhelmed, burned out, and exhausted.”

— Ms. Stewart, Yulee Middle School, 6th grade



Ms. Stewart joined [Impact Florida's Solving with Students Cadre](#) with the hope that the experience would reinvigorate her passion for teaching.

As part of her work with the Cadre, she administered the Elevate survey to her students. In her first survey, the results showed that students were not getting what they needed. For example, fewer than 30% of students saw how the material connected to real life. Their open responses corroborated this story. “School is like a prison, no one listens to us,” one student said. Another said, “I don’t think student suggestions matter that much.”



As hard as this feedback was to hear, Ms. Stewart was galvanized by this data and the belief that things could be different. Students in her classes voted on [Meaningful Work](#) and [Student Voice](#) as the areas they most wanted to change. Ms. Stewart had students write down what they liked about the class, what they didn't like, and what needed to improve. "There were stickies all over my classroom," Ms. Stewart said. Students also wrote down what they *couldn't* change—things like the curriculum or the fact that they had to do work in class.

After writing this material down, students voted again to select two key ideas for change. The first was *talk time*: each class started with five minutes during which students could talk about whatever they wanted within a circle of trust. The second was *choice*: students were allowed to choose how they wanted to learn, including things like who they wanted to work with, what kinds of word problems they would solve, and what longer-term projects were most exciting.




The results were dramatic. At the end of the year, one class went from 30% to 83% of students understanding how what they did in class was connected to real life. Students' grades improved, and they increasingly reported feeling as though they were part of a caring community.

"Was it easy? Absolutely not," Ms. Stewart said. But she also noted meaningful, worthwhile outcomes.

“We slowly became a family. We learned to trust each other. We had fun, but we learned. I was no longer stressed and exhausted at the end of the day when I got home.”

We've heard countless stories from teachers like Ms. Stewart who have partnered with students to dramatically transform their learning experiences.

 [Listen to Ms. Stewart's story](https://perts.net/elevate/stories/stewart)  
([perts.net/elevate/stories/stewart](https://perts.net/elevate/stories/stewart))

To access more stories like Ms. Stewart's, visit the [Elevate Showcase page](https://perts.net/elevate-showcase). ([perts.net/elevate-showcase](https://perts.net/elevate-showcase))

**THE REMAINDER OF THIS GUIDE** describes powerful approaches to student partnerships, as well as a few common pitfalls.



# Principles for Partnering with Students Around Data

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**THIS SECTION** explores three key principles for partnering with students to improve student experience, as well as best practices for enacting each principle effectively. The first two principles focus on complementary strategies for eliciting student voice: student surveys and generative dialogue.

As explored in greater detail below, surveys and generative dialogue each have important strengths that complement the relative weaknesses of the other. Surveys can make it far more practical for changemakers to get honest input; collect input from all students or a representative sample; and objectively assess what's really working and for whom. On the other hand, generative dialogue can create opportunities for deeper insights and the authentic co-creation of powerful solutions.

Whether one leverages surveys, dialogue, or both (as we suggest), **it is essential to show students that you are taking action based on their input**, not just “performing student voice.” The sections below explore each of these principles in more detail along with suggestions for enacting them well.



## PRINCIPLE 1

# Use Surveys to Objectively Assess Priorities and Progress

**SURVEYS PLAY AN ESSENTIAL ROLE** in improving student experience. When used appropriately, surveys empower educators to assess important dimensions of student experience quickly and objectively, compare the experiences of different groups of students, and recognize what approaches are reliable in improving experiences for many students.

**In the section below**, we share our recommendations for using student surveys in a way that facilitates trust and collaboration with students.



**NOTE:** [Field Guide 1: Setting the Foundation](https://perts.net/data-to-impact-1-pdf) (perts.net/data-to-impact-1-pdf) offers a more detailed discussion of data collection systems.

## Use a Validated Instrument to Probe Important Topics Directly

Education psychologists have spent decades identifying specific experiences that influence students' engagement, learning, well-being, and development, and researchers have created validated instruments to measure these experiences.<sup>18-25</sup> When partnering with students, it is important to leverage validated surveys such as these.

Without representative survey data, generative dialogue and/or co-design efforts with students risk centering the experiences of only a few students—often those most likely to volunteer and who may not reflect the broader student body. Validated surveys administered to representative samples of the student body allow changemakers to cross-reference what individual students are saying during rich qualitative conversations with what all students report in the survey data.

Even more importantly, validated surveys ensure that critical but often overlooked topics are addressed. This is important because our past experiences can limit our sense of what's possible. For example, while meaningful work is a proven driver of student engagement, students unfamiliar with engaging assignments might not suggest improving it.<sup>8-12</sup> However, if young people are directly asked if their work is connected to real life or if they find it interesting via a validated survey, they can likely report whether or not it's meaningful and why. This can spark deeper conversations about how to improve it.

## Provide Confidentiality

Just as teachers may find certain kinds of feedback hard to hear, young people may find certain truths difficult to tell. Consider the student who told Ms. Stewart that school was “like a prison.” This feedback was given confidentially. Without confidentiality, such a statement could have real consequences for the young person who said it if an adult who wields power over them were to take offense.

Similarly, asking young people to rate their experiences of things like belonging, school safety, well-being, etc. may sometimes feel deeply personal to students. If surveys collecting such information share identifiers along with students' responses to the questions, students may not be comfortable answering honestly. To obtain honest feedback from students, it is essential to use a survey framework that provides students with confidentiality.

## BEST PRACTICES FOR ENSURING CONFIDENTIALITY



Collecting and reporting student survey data *confidentially* brings challenges. Below are some strong practices for ensuring confidentiality.

### Hide direct identifiers

When presenting summaries and reports of survey data, avoid associating survey responses with direct identifiers like students' names, emails, or student ID numbers.

### Watch out for indirect identifiers too!

Direct identifiers, like names, are not the only way students can be identified. It is often possible to figure out the identity of individual students by cross-referencing *indirect* identifiers. For example, if there is only one girl of Caucasian descent in a particular grade level, then viewing a breakdown of survey data by grade level, gender, and race would reveal this

girl's individual survey responses. In the Elevate platform, responses are only revealed when at least *five* members of a disaggregated group can be averaged together. This ensures that individual students are never being singled out.

### Be transparent with students about who can see their data and what they will do with it

Many Elevate teachers actually show students their data reports, so that students can see how data is summarized and presented. This kind of transparency increases trust between young people and adults, and has the additional benefit of engaging students in reviewing data.

## Collect Longitudinal Follow-Up Data

When Ms. Stewart made changes in her own classroom, she re-surveyed her students several times to ascertain whether her changes had the desired effect. This sends a powerful message to students: It shows them that their teachers are willing to keep trying until their learning experiences meaningfully change. Young people—especially adolescents—are particularly sensitive to cues of respect.<sup>26</sup> They are looking for signals of whether they are being taken seriously. Few things send a stronger signal of respect to young people than asking for their input, making changes, and following up to determine if the changes are effective. Longitudinal data allows this to happen.

## PRINCIPLE 2

# Supplement Surveys with Generative Dialogue

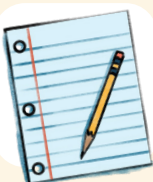
**WE'VE CONSISTENTLY OBSERVED** that teachers in the Elevate Network with the most stunning transformations have found simple ways of collecting qualitative data from their students. Whereas quantitative data ensures that important topics are probed systematically, qualitative data is usually needed to understand what specifically needs to change in a given context. For example, Ms. Stewart saw in her survey data that her students needed to experience a greater sense of meaning in their coursework and a greater voice in what they learned. However, these findings did not specify how to achieve that. It was her conversations with students—scaffolded by sticky notes—that aligned her class around a couple of powerful change ideas.

Below we share a few procedures for supporting generative dialogue with students.



### BRIEF PERTS ARTICLE

The PERTS Elevate support page provides a [few options for debriefing data with students](#), including a [sample lesson plan](#) for student-led discussions.



### DETAILED GUIDE

The Student Powered Improvement Initiative by Community Design Partners offers a series of practical [resources](#) for partnering with students, including a [20-page guide](#) with lesson plans and specific procedures for eliciting qualitative insights from students about their data.<sup>27</sup>



### BOOK

The book *Street Data* (Safir & Dugan, 2021)<sup>28</sup> provides a comprehensive account of how to collect qualitative data from students insightfully and equitably.

Whichever process is used, we recommend using one that surfaces concerns from all students in a class (including those least likely to raise their hands) and offers anonymity. For example, Ms. Stewart's sticky notes ensured that all students were heard. And the class discussion and voting procedures allowed them to arrive at a consensus about what would change in their classrooms.

### PRINCIPLE 3

## Show Students That You Are Taking Action

“When young people see their voice data being used, they do not get survey fatigue. What fatigues young people is taking survey after survey, and not seeing the results.”

— Dr. Kimberly Hinton, Network for College Success, Director of Coaching

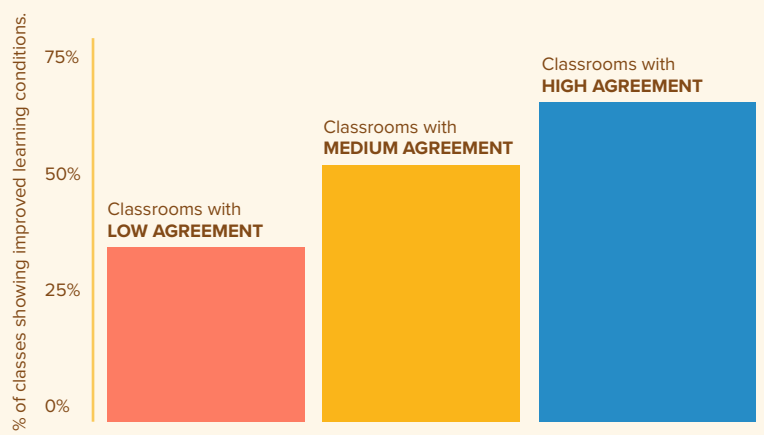
**WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE** are asked to complete surveys, participate in generative dialogues, and provide feedback about their experiences in other ways, they need to see *evidence* of their input being taken seriously.

As a case in point, when Finefter-Rosenbluh et al. (2021) interviewed teachers and students about student experience surveys, one ninth-grade student in their study gave the following account: “We wanted, as a class, to listen to music when doing collaborative class work but they said, ‘no, it distracts you’ and we said, ‘no, we just told you [in the surveys] that it doesn’t! It really helps us focus!’ But they insist...so why are you asking us all these questions in the first place?”

### LISTENING TO STUDENTS PAYS OFF

Learning conditions improve when **students believe adults** will take action.

“My instructor will try to use my answers to this survey to make this class better for me.”



[Learn more about this graph](#)

This student was clearly frustrated: it can feel demoralizing, verging on disrespectful, to be repeatedly asked for input that is then disregarded.

Year after year, PERTS analyses show that learning conditions improve most when young people believe that adults will actually try to use their survey responses to make improvements.<sup>29</sup> Other researchers are beginning to report similar findings.<sup>30</sup>

The takeaway is clear: when students believe surveys are truly being used to make school better, learning conditions improve.

Our network has learned that **the following strategies are useful** for showing students their teachers are taking action based on their input.

## Make Changes

It may seem to go without saying that change-makers should actually make changes based on data and dialogues with students. Yet sometimes educators stall out at this step. This usually happens either because individuals feel overwhelmed or disempowered in responding to data, or because they lack access to sound evidence-based practices to implement.

[Guide 1 of this series](#) ([perts.net/data-to-impact-1-pdf](https://perts.net/data-to-impact-1-pdf)) discusses the importance of having a set of evidence-based practices available. For example, the Elevate Network uses nine [learning condition guides](#) ([perts.net/elevate/practices](https://perts.net/elevate/practices)) developed by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

[Guide 2 of this series](#) ([perts.net/data-to-impact-2-pdf](https://perts.net/data-to-impact-2-pdf)) discusses how professional learning communities can create environments where educators feel empowered to respond proactively to student data.

## Show...and Also Tell

It can be useful to explicitly help students recognize that new practices are being implemented in response to their survey answers. For example, if survey data reveals that students do not yet feel a strong sense of community in their classroom, educators can address this by following various [evidence-based practices](#) for fostering a sense of classroom community, such as establishing community norms and creating opportunities for student-centered discussion. While students

may appreciate and benefit from these changes, they may not make the connection *between their survey responses* and the implemented practices unless those connections are explicitly highlighted.

Ms. Stewart demonstrated this approach through her generative dialogue sessions with students. By discussing change ideas together as a class, it became clear to everyone that the new classroom practices were designed to address concerns raised in the surveys. As an added benefit, students also had direct input into what the changes would be. This kind of transparency and collaboration allows students to see the impact of their feedback.

## Follow Up to Ask How It Went

Finally, as mentioned at the beginning of this guide, it is critical to follow up with students to assess how the changes affected them. This approach sends a strong message that their learning experiences are valued and that educators are committed to making meaningful adjustments based on student feedback.





## WHAT IF STUDENTS WANT SOMETHING THAT ISN'T FEASIBLE?

Taking action based on students' input does not necessarily mean educators must honor every request made by students, as this may not always be possible. For example, students may request to listen to music, but this may not be possible with another classroom nearby that requires silence. Or students may request less homework, which may not be feasible due to curriculum requirements. Here are some productive strategies when students request changes that are not immediately feasible.

### Understand the Need Behind the Request

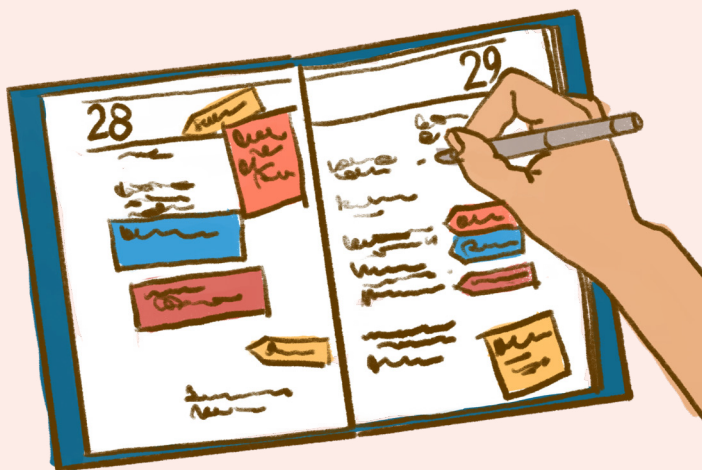
Oftentimes, students' specific requests represent only one way of addressing an underlying need. By surfacing the need, it may be possible to uncover other ways of addressing it. For example, if students say they want to abolish homework...*why is that?* Is it that they don't see how the assignments are developing their skills, or perhaps the work isn't challenging? If so, then adjustments to the *kind of homework* may address the underlying need. Or perhaps these students feel overwhelmed with extracurricular activities or job/family obligations. In that case, flexible deadlines at busy times of the year may address the underlying need. Students will generally appreciate the effort to work with their needs, even when it isn't possible to honor all of their specific requests.

### Focus on What is Actionable Now

While Ms. Stewart did make transformational changes in her classroom, she was honest with her students about the things they could not immediately change. As a classroom teacher, Ms. Stewart could not change school- and district-level policies, like adopting a new curriculum or changing homework policies—not on her own, at least. By being transparent with students about these limitations, she could focus on realistic improvements that would still feel important and meaningful to students.

### Strive for Bigger Changes Over Longer Periods of Time

Over time, changemakers can expand beyond their current limitations, for example, by bringing in school or district leaders who have the power to make more sweeping changes. Such conversations are often bolstered by concrete data from students suggesting that larger changes would be impactful. For example, one social studies teacher in the Elevate Network leveraged the input he collected from his students to advocate successfully with district leadership for a more culturally relevant curriculum that would better engage his students. Of course, such bigger changes take time to enact. In the meantime, it is important to be responsive to students in the ways that are feasible in the short-term—and to be honest about what is and is not feasible in the immediate term.





# Acknowledgements

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