

WHITE PAPER

Really Ready

Preparing ALL Middle and High School Students for College, Work, and Life

Getting Smart, in partnership with Apex Learning

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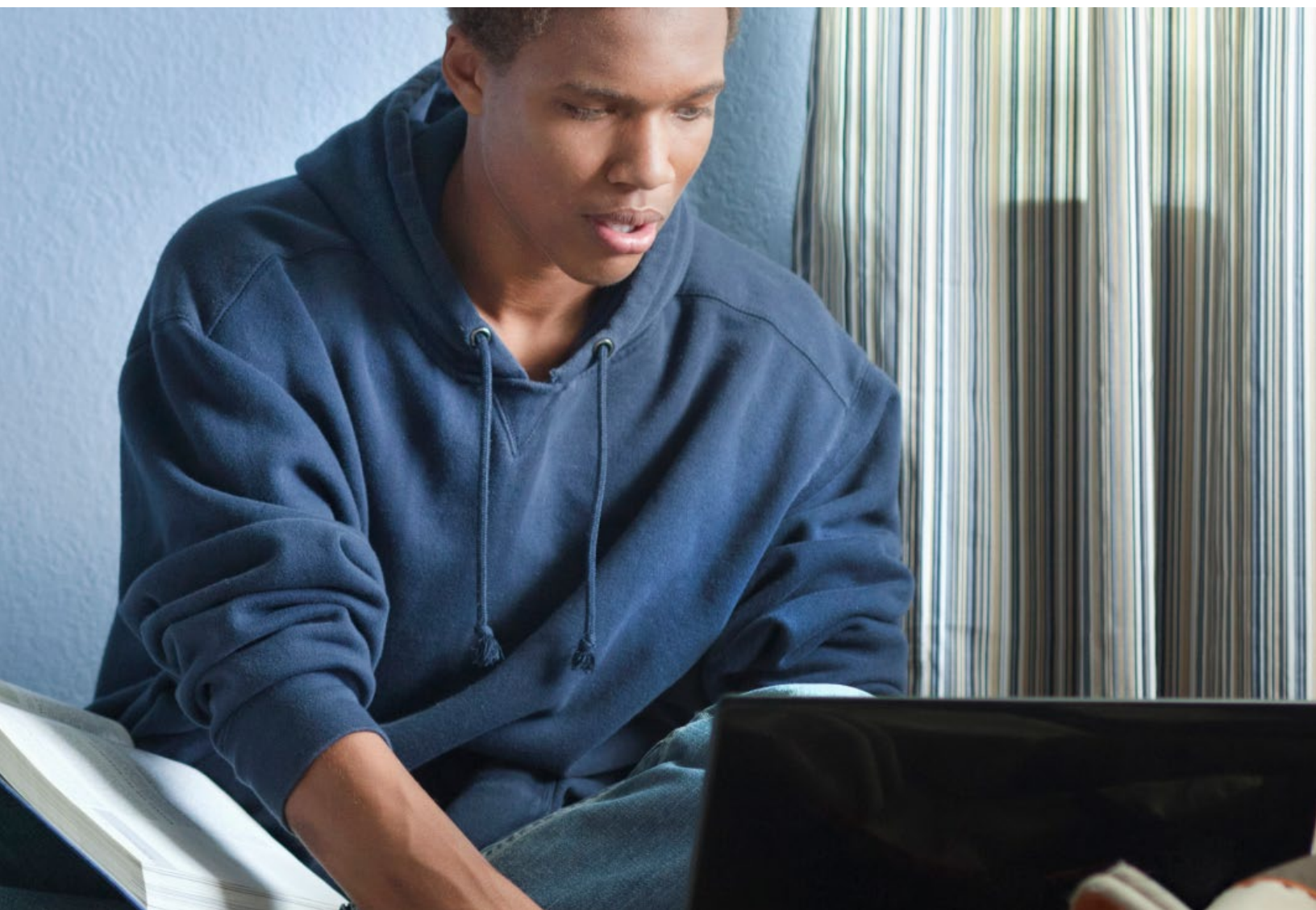




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Introduction

The world of work is quickly redefining what it means to be ready—a broader set of aims that reflect fast-paced, complex, and diverse workplaces. Traditional notions of what college and work readiness means will need to continuously evolve as we navigate this new economy¹, an economy where students will be working at jobs that we have never heard of before or even envisioned to be a possibility. Students graduating in the next few years may freelance and never hold a long-term regular shift job. Most of their postsecondary learning may be online or through boot camps that sprint to specific outcomes.²

As schools and districts across the country seek to prepare students for work and life beyond their secondary education, defining readiness and determining readiness strategies becomes increasingly important.

Based on work by the [Partnership for 21st Century Learning](#) and early research on productive mindsets, the [Hewlett Foundation](#) defined outcomes resulting from [deeper learning](#) experiences. Building on this work, we find that students who are really ready possess **critical thinking, communication, and social and emotional skills**, as well as the ability to be **self-directed learners** with a **growth mindset**.

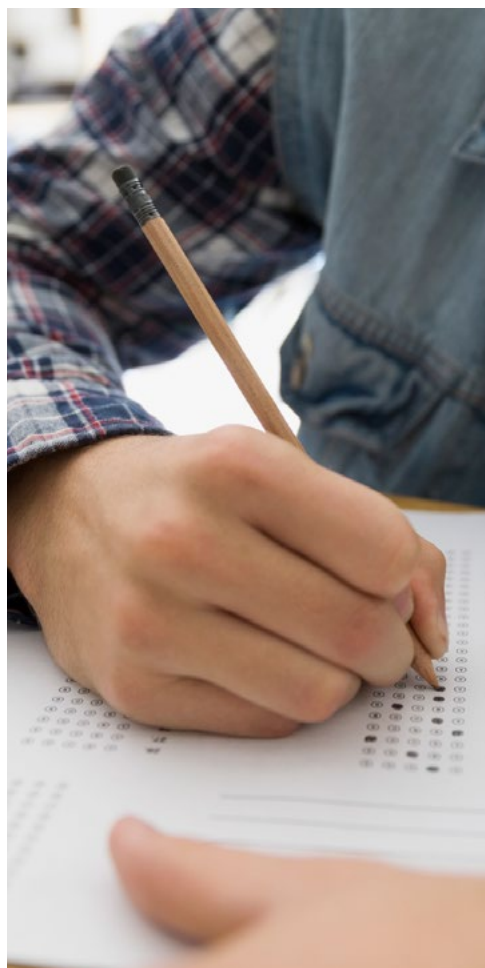
Helping all students develop these skills and dispositions—from those who are struggling academically and might not be as motivated to students who are learning a second language—will require that more learning happens for every student. The rise of blended learning, access to technology, and rigorous digital curricula is driving the opportunity to truly personalize learning to keep all students actively engaged and appropriately challenged, and to prepare them with the skills to be really ready.

In this paper, we explore what it means to be a really ready middle school or high school student, share preparation strategies, and highlight two districts that are seeing success. Every minute spent with students in secondary education is an opportunity to make more learning happen.³ Let's help all students be really ready now.

“Working nine-to-five for a single employer bears little resemblance to the way a substantial share of the workforce makes a living today.”

**James Manyika and
Jacques Bughin**

Directors of the McKinsey
Global Institute, in *Independent work:
Choice, necessity, and the gig economy*



What It Means to Be Really Ready

Traditionally, schools have aimed to provide students with the knowledge and skills for their future 10 years down the road. Often, this has meant that preparation is based on assumptions about typical job requirements and the desired prerequisites. However, with the recent changes in the economy, we cannot be certain what college or work will look like 10 years from now.

What we can be certain of is that students will need to be able to think critically and solve novel and complex problems, be able to communicate to diverse groups and across varied types of teams, take initiative in their own learning, be confident that they can meet their goals through hard work and persistence, and be well-balanced, socially and emotionally savvy people overall. Student success in middle and high school, college, work, and life depends on them having meaningful learning experiences targeted towards these skills.



“You are competing for a job with every kid in the world for a workplace that values creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship... things that are not routinely nurtured in most schools.”

John M. Eger

Director of the Creative Economy Initiative at San Diego State University, in [Remembering High School](#)

Really Ready Skills



Think critically and solve complex problems.*

Students apply tools and techniques gleaned from core subjects to formulate and solve problems. These tools include data analysis, statistical reasoning, and scientific inquiry, as well as creative problem solving, nonlinear thinking, and persistence.



Communicate effectively.*

Students clearly organize their data, findings, and thoughts in both written and oral communication. Students are able to articulate their ideas through public performances and presentations, both online and in-person.



Be self-directed.*

Students monitor and direct their own learning. They are able to learn how to learn and take on projects and tasks on their own. Students are able to manage their learning and create processes to help them accomplish their goals and work.



Have a growth mindset.⁴ **

Students believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. Students develop positive attitudes and beliefs about themselves as learners that increase their academic perseverance and prompt them to engage in productive academic behaviors.



Develop social and emotional skills.***

Students understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.⁵

*Skills adapted or directly from [Deeper Learning for Every Student Every Day](#)

**Growth mindset based on the work of [Carol Dweck](#)

***Social and emotional skills definition from [CASEL](#)

The Problem We Are Trying to Solve

From *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*:

- **7 in 10 (69%) students said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard**
- **47% of dropouts said that class was not interesting or relevant**
- **2/3 of students who dropped out said they would've worked harder if more was demanded of them**
- **29% of students say they lacked confidence that they could actually meet the requirements and graduate**

Critical Thinking

Jobs involving repetitive tasks and the routine application of rule sets are in the process of being automated out of existence. Value-added jobs involve problem-solving and generating of new ideas.⁶ This will require critical-thinking skills and an innovation mindset—an appreciation that effort, initiative, and collaboration are key to adding value.⁷

Students headed to college and into the workforce will frequently be tasked with open-ended problems and charged with identifying solutions to novel problems. Really ready critical-thinkers are curious and inquisitive. They come up with entrepreneurial ideas and divergent solutions. They also are able to analyze, evaluate, and reason to strategically solve problems.

Students who are considered behind academically in grade levels often spend more time on “catching-up” and less time on challenging and complex problems. All students deserve time to practice and develop critical-thinking skills.

Communication

Whether through written, nonverbal, or verbal form, we are constantly communicating. More than ever, our world is interconnected. The Internet and smartphones have brought access to information, networks, and people to our fingertips. Our messages and ideas need to stand out amid the overwhelming amount of input we are receiving every day.

Communication online and face-to-face are of equal importance, as is how students adapt their messages when working with diverse groups of people or in different settings. Further, students in both college and career life will likely take courses or complete training online. They will need to be able to communicate and articulate their ideas in all of these environments. All students need to know how to effectively articulate and share their ideas.





Self-Direction

Students that are self-directed have learned how to learn. Self-directed learners are able to take on projects and tasks on their own. They are able to manage their learning and create processes to help them accomplish their goals and work.

It is critical for students in college, career, and life to understand how to monitor and direct their own learning. Self-direction is becoming increasingly imperative, as more and more people are working in [freelance, independent, or gig-based roles](#).

After school, we are also expected to create our own paths and determine how to move forward in education, work, and life.

Graduation Rate

62%

The graduation rate for the nation's English-language learners in the class of 2014 was only at 62.6 percent compared to the overall national average of 82 percent.⁸

Lack of Soft Skills

58%

58% of 291 hiring managers surveyed say the lack of soft skills among candidates “is limiting their company’s productivity.”⁹

Growth Mindset

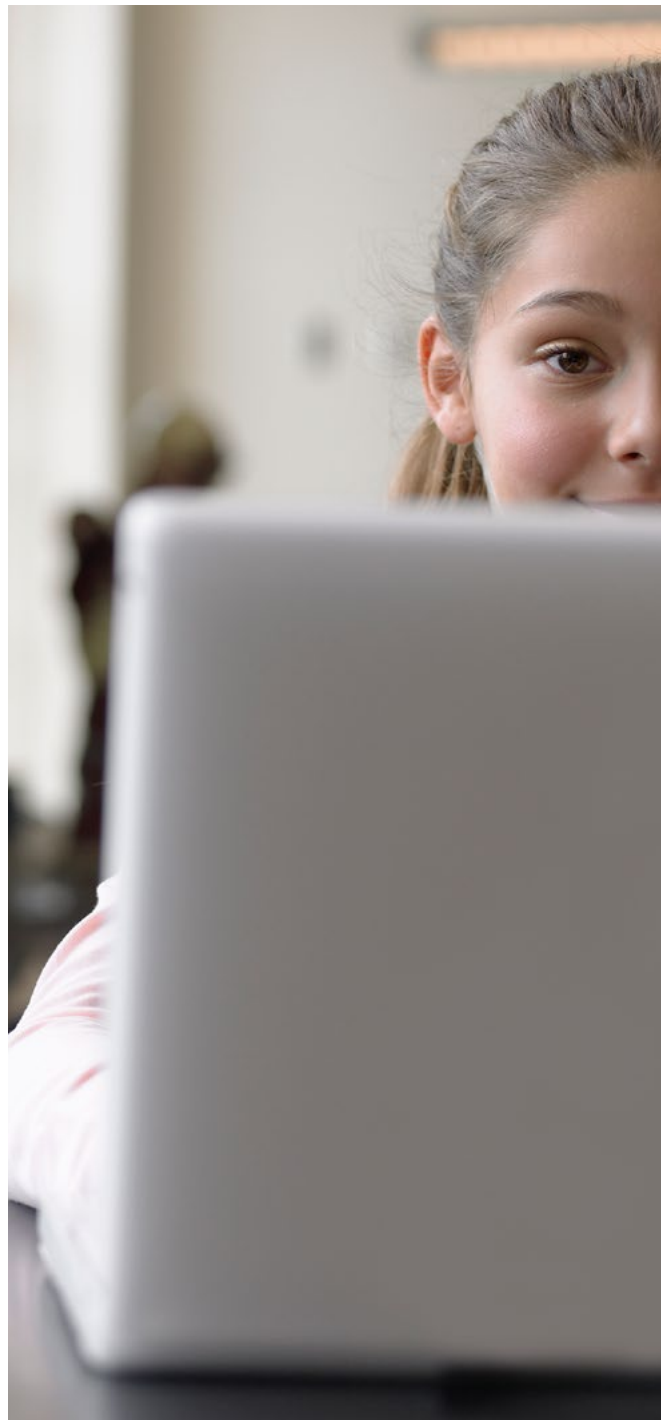
Fundamental to educating self-directed learners is the idea that students believe in themselves as learners and persist through tasks to meet their goals. They believe that they can develop skills through hard work and that their ability is not fixed. Students who have a growth mindset are more likely to work through adversity and figure out how to continue until they have accomplished what they set out to do.

Over time, students with a growth mindset develop more positive attitudes and beliefs about themselves as learners, which can increase their academic perseverance and prompt them to engage in productive academic behaviors. Students are committed to seeing work through to completion, meeting their goals, and doing quality work. They persist through obstacles and adversity, and see failure as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Social and Emotional Skills

According to CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), students who have strong social and emotional skills have the ability to self-regulate, understand, and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.¹⁰

Students—regardless if they go straight into the workforce or opt to go to college—will need social and emotional skills. The ability to work with others, foster meaningful relationships, and develop self-awareness, decision-making, and management skills ought to be a core part of secondary education.



More Learning for All Students

Often these really ready skills are reserved for those students who are seen as ready for additional challenges, or who have already demonstrated mastery in core academic areas. Students in middle school who are feeling uninterested or that school isn't meeting their needs may not be optimistic that high school will be much better. For those who do make it to high school, the statistics on why students drop out or state that they do not feel prepared validate the need for more focus on developing really ready skills universally. Similar reasons are also cited as causing college students to leave.¹¹ Schools need to help make more really ready learning happen for their increasingly diverse student populations—not just for those who are already clearly on the path to college or career.¹²

Students who are struggling with core academic coursework or who are English language learners (ELL students) are more likely to drop out than their peers, due to the frustration that school isn't meeting their needs, lacks relevance to real life or is not a place that they feel they can be successful.¹⁶ ELL students are often tasked with focusing on learning the English language and not given as much time or work on developing really ready skills.

Failing repeatedly becomes too frustrating and disappointing, and causes many students to give up on secondary education. When students fail, catching up on credit requirements becomes difficult—especially in regards to scheduling and time management. Almost half of students who decide to drop out say that they were not well prepared or inspired to work hard.¹⁷ In order to help students develop these skills, specific strategies ought to be implemented to support their individual strengths and needs.¹⁸

Common challenges or reasons high-school students drop out:

- Lacked interest, or classes did not seem relevant to them
- Were not motivated by school or inspired to work hard
- Experienced frequent failure of classes and requirement to repeat courses
- Experienced difficult school transitions
- Had low confidence or self-efficacy
- Did not feel they were prepared (for middle or high school)
- Lacked advising, resources or support
- Experienced language barriers
- Required, but did not receive, adequate additional academic supports
- Failed to meet credit requirements and fell too far behind
- Experienced adverse family circumstances, or needed to be a primary-income provider
- Struggled to fit in

* Summarized from: Understanding Why Students Drop Out of High School, According to Their Own Reports and The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts



We need to make more learning happen that is connected, challenging, and engaging to try to address some of these causes for students dropping out. According to the [National Dropout Prevention Center](#), active learning, educational technology, individualized instruction, one-to-one tutoring or mentoring, and career and technical education are on the list of the top 15 effective strategies for dropout prevention. When students receive personalized learning where their individual needs are met and these strategies are employed, they feel more supported and confident they can succeed.¹⁹

We need to optimize the time we have with students in middle and high school by providing them with learning experiences that help them to develop their really ready skills. If we want all students—including those who face one or many of the aforementioned challenges, and even those who are ready for an additional push or enrichment—to feel confident and persist through middle and high school into college or work, we must change our approach.

Strategies for Achieving Really Ready Student Outcomes

Most school districts across the country support the idea that preparing students with really ready skills for college, work, and life is a good goal. Many also want to address high student dropout rates. By addressing really ready skills, districts can simultaneously work toward both of these goals. Districts that already have been focusing on these skills have seen [impressive student results](#) and increased graduation rates.

| #ReallyReady Skill | Strategy or Support | Student Outcome |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| Critical Thinking | Frequent critical-thinking tasks or challenges | Students feel challenged and more prepared for novel and complex problems. |
| | Additional practice and time | Students feel accomplished and engaged because they get to work on content other than just basic skills. |
| Communication | Feedback and practice on written and oral communication skills | Students feel increased confidence in communicating and presenting. |
| | Language-translation and vocabulary cues | Students experience increased comprehension of written and spoken communication, and increased oral-communication skills. |
| Self-Direction | Individualized learning pathways and course options | Students become more self-directed and take ownership of their learning. |
| | Active learning strategies; rigorous, relevant and adaptive content | Students are more active and engaged in their learning. |
| Growth Mindset | Feedback and support | Students receive encouragement and guidance, and develop more of a growth mindset to help them persist. |
| | Scaffolds and support throughout | Students feel more successful, and feel that their learning is relevant to their needs and that they are progressing. |
| Social and Emotional Skills | Real-time assessment, tutorials, and support | Students feel supported and receive reinforcement. Students develop more self-awareness and can set academic goals. |
| | Options and choice in courses (credit-recovery, CTE, AP, test prep) | Students feel valued and confident that they can fulfill the necessary requirements. Students exercise decision-making skills. |



DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT

Houston Independent School District

Houston Independent School District (HISD), the largest school district in Texas, is located in one of the most diverse metropolitan areas in the United States. Faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse student population, district administrators are focused on increasing student achievement and ensuring all students are [graduating ready for college, work, and life](#). Underlying this goal is the desire to ensure that all students have access to rigorous, high-quality instruction, regardless of their individual level of academic readiness.²² To support students struggling to stay on track to graduate, HISD administrators introduced a number of initiatives, including:

- **Digital Curricula in Blended Classrooms.** Students throughout secondary classrooms use digital curricula across core academic subjects. Faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse student population, district administrators have focused on increasing student achievement and ensuring all students are graduating ready. According to a [2013 efficacy](#) study conducted by the Department of Research and Accountability, 93% of 12th-grade HISD students who took an Apex Learning course graduated.
- **Graduation Laboratories (GradLabs).** The GradLabs Initiative was designed to increase the graduation rate by providing students with credit-recovery and supplemental-learning opportunities through online coursework and tutoring.²³

Fast Facts

- **215,000+ students**
- **63% ELL students**
- **64% students that are considered at-risk**
- **74% students that come from low-income²¹**



DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT

Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation

To increase student achievement and keep students engaged, Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation (EVSC) decided to tap into technology in order to provide students with quality options beyond the traditional classroom, empowering students to meet their individual learning goals. EVSC created online learning environments, from blended to full-time virtual learning, with the purpose of getting more students excited about learning and keeping them on track toward graduation. EVSC created online learning environments, from blended to full-time virtual learning, with the purpose of getting more students excited about learning, keeping them on track toward graduation and ensuring they are better prepared for their next level of learning.

Through the [EVSC](#) Virtual Academy, students are enrolling in online courses for advancement, early graduation, and credit recovery, or for grade replacement to raise their GPAs.

Fast Facts

- **24,000+ students**
- **16% students with special needs**
- **44% students from a racial minority group**
- **59% students qualify for free and reduced lunch**



Conclusion

Readiness for college, work, and life is at the forefront of many educators' minds, and is often seen as the beacon that we aim for all students to reach. However, making it to graduation does not always mean that students will be ready for the path in life that they want to go down. Being really ready means more than just getting a high-school diploma. Students need to be critical thinkers and great communicators, be self-directed, and have a growth mindset and social and emotional skills. Schools and districts that know that readiness cannot be left to chance need to strategically address the necessary skills in order to help students be prepared.

By giving students school experiences and opportunities where more learning happens, they will have a greater chance to confidently and successfully navigate the transitions and challenges in their future, whether they matriculate from high school and go on to college or go straight into the workforce.

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