Essential Conditions for Designing an RPP: Insights From the Field and Literature

National research–practice partnership (RPP) experts share their critical insights about the conditions needed to launch a new RPP

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Introduction

As the field of research–practice partnerships (RPPs) expands, the need to understand the conditions under which RPPs can develop, launch, and ultimately thrive increases. Since its inception in 2016, the National Network of Education Research–Practice Partnerships (NNERPP) has more than tripled its number of RPP members, from 16 to 59 organizations registered at the annual forum in 2022 (NNERPP, n.d.). Although the literature base is expanding to include frameworks, descriptive language for roles and behaviors of participants involved in RPPs, and methods to assess the health and strength of RPPs, resources that document what is needed to successfully launch and sustain an RPP are limited.[1] As such, it is important for individuals who are considering establishing an RPP to have a sharp understanding of what, in fact, they are signing up for so that they go into this endeavor with eyes wide open.

Establishing an RPP is a significant investment of both time and resources and requires that the leaders commit to doing their work in different, more collaborative ways (The Collaborative Education Research Collective, 2023). Coupled with the steep rise in organizations forming to bridge the gap between research and practice are myriad forms of media (e.g., books, research, articles, webinars, toolkits, and workshops) designed to help burgeoning RPPs plan, launch, and sustain their existence and operate effectively and efficiently in service of their mission and vision (Wentworth et al., 2021). Collectively, these resources arm RPP leaders with useful frameworks, concepts, role-clarifying language, and strategies to support RPP work and provide key indicators with which to assess the health of an RPP to strengthen its impact in the communities it is designed to serve.

This paper builds upon existing literature and resources to provide key elements and specific examples of best practices to create conducive conditions for designing an RPP, ensuring a successful launch, and creating pathways to sustainability. The American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) conducted interviews with national education RPP experts in fall 2022 and synthesized the research literature on best practices for planning, launching, and sustaining RPPs to deepen insights of the essential conditions for success.[2] We sought to gather diverse perspectives, interviewing RPP leaders from research-side institutions and practice-side partners in state agencies and school districts, researchers who study RPPs, and funders who have provided grants to establish and develop RPPs. This comprehensive undertaking resulted in a set of key lessons that are essential for conceptualizing and launching a new RPP. In addition to surfacing strong connections between the research literature and interviewed experts' insights and reflections

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[1] For examples of resources, visit the NNERPP RPP Knowledge Clearinghouse on launching RPPs: https://nnerpp.rice.edu/kc_launching/

[2] This article is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within the article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

more broadly, we intentionally sought to understand how successful RPPs foster equity within themselves. Explicit recognition and reconciliation of long-standing inequities between researchers and partners are required, and a shared understanding of equity must be established to benchmark against an assumption that everyone in the partnership is on equal footing and has equal investment in time and resources (Farrell et al., 2021; Denner et al., 2019; Vetter et al., 2022).

Methods

Our research drew from a purposeful sample of RPP experts and scholars, as well as a comprehensive review of relevant literature, to examine the facilitating factors and common barriers faced by RPPs in their early stages. The interview sample included 18 RPP experts, including members in NNERRP and RPP scholars, and the literature review included 34 published articles about RPPs.

AIR coded interview findings and literature using the five dimensions of the Henrick et al. (2017) framework for healthy RPPs: building trust and cultivating relationships, conducting rigorous research to inform action, supporting the partner practice organization in achieving its goals, producing knowledge that can inform improvement efforts, and building research and practice organizations' capacity to engage in the work. In an updated article, the authors of the framework argue that, as RPPs work toward each dimension of effectiveness, they are also, in fact, working toward developing equitable relationships between researchers and practitioners, supporting equitable outcomes for students, and developing equitable systems by reconceptualizing how research and practice institutions and communities work together to achieve shared goals and remove persistent barriers (Henrick et al., 2019). We found that this framework and its orientation to equity provided clear markers for the organizing principles and high-impact practices of healthy RPPs that enabled us to surface a set of themes that address the question regarding the conditions that support designing an RPP that centers equity in its design, is inclusive of diverse stakeholder perspectives, and ultimately meets the needs of the community it serves. More information about our methods can be found in Appendix A.

What We Learned About Designing an RPP

What we learned not only underscores existing scholarship regarding the necessary conditions for healthy RPPs but also offers a level of nuance of key factors that inhibit or enable those conditions to occur, which has not been addressed thus far in the literature. RPP leaders described, in detail, the critical steps taken at the design of their partnerships and at key moments in the lifespan of

the RPPs. These insights illuminated how RPPs become established and evolve over time and how certain developmental milestones were helpful reflection points to assess the growth and success of their RPPs. Throughout the interviews, RPP leaders and experts repeatedly emphasized that the bedrock of success is building trust, which is consistent with the literature (Denner et al., 2019; Farrell et al., 2021; Farrell et al., 2019; Henrick et al., 2017; Kochanek et al., 2020).

The result of our interviews is a rich narrative that contains multiple key considerations for partners planning, launching, and sustaining an RPP built off a core principle that RPPs are not one-size-fits-all models. Although the literature identifies specific RPP models, such as place-based research alliances or network improvement communities (Coburn et al., 2013), the interviewees suggest that the model the RPP uses is less critical. Rather, it is more important that the RPP meets the goals and needs of its members and focuses on building a strong degree of trust between members through collaboration, mutual ownership, and shared decision making. The approach and structure of RPPs can vary, depending on the goals and needs of the participants and the local context (Farrell et al., 2022). Despite variations in RPP design, our interviews revealed four common elements across successful RPPs.

Common elements of successful RPPs
Inclusive leadership structure, with equal membership from the practice side and the research side
Co-developed mission, vision, and charter to ensure inclusivity and equity
Responsive research agenda that drives the research activities of the RPP and communicates priorities to diverse stakeholders
Infrastructure and institutionalizing practices to generate the capacity, processes, and systems that enable the RPP to function

As further evidence that RPP models are not one-size-fits-all, RPP experts advised that successful RPPs develop organically over time from researcher–practitioner relationships and previous collaborative projects. One interviewee recommended that individuals interested in establishing a new RPP "build RPPs off of partnerships that are existing." These prior relationships and examples of past success in working jointly can be solid foundations on which to establish an RPP. However, the literature cautions that trust is not gained (nor should it be) by the assertion of good intentions; rather, it is built and cultivated over time and proven through interactions and behaviors that promote trust. Indeed, "trust must be earned every time the partnership is introduced to another agency or organization" (Denner et al., 2019, Discussion section, para. 4).

Inclusive Leadership Structures

Inclusive leadership structures are critical to designing an RPP model that will capitalize on the strengths and interests of researchers and best meet the needs of partners and communities the RPP serves. Leaders must present a unified message that is diffused vertically and horizontally across the partnership to build capacity and will (Wilcox & Zuckerman, 2019).

Advisory councils are promising leadership structures to build RPP identity and keep the mission, vision, and goals of the RPP front and center as key decisions are made about the organizational structure of the RPP and to ensure inclusivity in an RPP (Hays et al., 2019). Advisory boards or steering committees often serve to ensure a range of diverse perspectives, particularly perspectives of representatives from key stakeholder institutions (e.g., unions, youth-serving agencies or nonprofit organizations, school leaders, students, parents, legislative representatives, and university leaders). These stakeholders also serve as champions and connectors for the RPP. RPP experts emphasized the importance of clearly defined roles and responsibilities for advisory boards and that these boards should be established early in the RPP and then revisited over time as the RPP evolves. One RPP leader shared how the advisory council helped maintain stability and momentum within the RPP over time:

> "We also created an advisory council, which included all of the major actors in the [location] education policy that meets at least quarterly but is also available for sort of ongoing consultation to support the work. And that advisory council has been really key. The partnership with the department has ebbed and flowed over time with different personnel, different people, different priorities. But having that advisory council in place, more constant membership and sort of ongoing support for the partnership has been . . . I think that has been really key to our success."
>
> – *RPP Leader*

Furthermore, striving to be inclusive reinforces a need to generate role clarity and determine authority in decision making—both of which will also help to build trust between partners. New RPPs must perform due diligence in coordinating the development of shared goals, research activity, and roles dedicated to partnerships in ways that privilege the expertise of all members in the partnership. Cultivating relationships includes taking time to understand the strengths and expertise of each team member, as well as appreciating diverging or competing perspectives about the need for the RPP, essential problems of practice, critical partners to involve, and the allocation of resources and talent (Phelps, 2019). One RPP leader underlined this essential condition:

> "I think, for any RPP, what it always boils down to is relationships. So if you're building an RPP from scratch, on day zero, before you even start, you've got to understand the relationships of the people involved, how they already know each other, how they do not know each other, what identities they're bringing to the work, the different power dynamics that might result from working together on something. So there's several prerequisite steps to even take in terms of mapping the actors that are going to be in the space before you do anything else, before you build a research agenda, all those things."
>
> – *RPP Leader*

Co-Developed Charter, Mission, and Vision

The RPP charter defines the mission, vision, scope, objectives, and intended outcomes of the RPP. The experts we interviewed were clear that RPPs are often perceived as mutualistic, meaning an equally beneficial or symbiotic relationship exists between researchers and partners (Lezotte et al., 2022; Welsh, 2021). To establish an RPP that members perceive as mutualistic, members must have a candid discussion about what the partnership means to each person and have a shared belief and commitment to establishing benefit for all stakeholders. The RPP should integrate the results of these discussions —partnership meaning and shared beliefs—in the RPP charter, thereby institutionalizing their shared understanding and paving the way for the RPP to benefit all members. Over time, as the RPP and the relationships of the RPP members evolve and strengthen, the potential for the research to be impactful also grows.

> "It's really important to up front state what it is both sides are really looking to get out of the partnership. I think obviously there's going to be a lot of mutual, beneficial things that can happen, which is great, but I think it's also really useful for both sides to have a candid conversation about what they're looking to get out of this. Because I think a lot of times that is kind of implied or assumed, but then it's not until later on that all of a sudden these tensions kind of bubble up, and it's because this is never surfaced early on."
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> *– RPP Leader*

Furthermore, the charter (and, within the charter, the mission and vision) serves as a critical milestone for addressing power imbalances, and architects of the charter must include routines and protocols for collaborative decision making. RPP research and experts stress the importance of explicitly recognizing and reconciling long-standing inequities between researchers and partners and including early on the voices of stakeholders impacted by policy or practice decisions. Establishing a shared understanding of equity is necessary to ensure everyone in the partnership has equal investment in time and resources. Amplifying the voices of those individuals, including students, parents, and teachers, historically excluded due to power imbalances, structural racism, and other factors is also necessary.

Finally, RPP experts stressed the importance of having all critical partners at the table and clarifying their roles in the partnership. Key staff from both the research and practice sides must possess expertise, authority, influence, connections, and time to create change. Collaborative efforts are hindered when people feel obligated to participate instead of having a sense of joint ownership—the feeling of obligation can negatively impact trust (Henrick et al., 2017; Phelps 2019).

> "I do think it's very important to be intentional about equity with every project and whose voices aren't being heard. I said it earlier, I did that process with our stakeholders. I mean, I really reached out to people and said, 'Hey, I'm just asking you informally. You don't even have to put it in writing. You can call me. Who is not being heard here?"
>
> *— RPP Leader*

Responsive Research Agenda

For an RPP to build capacity and achieve its goals and aims, it will need to adopt a responsive research agenda that attends to the evolving needs of the partners and communities it serves. Challenges arise when new partnerships maintain or ignore existing status hierarchies or fail to examine their positionalities or reinforce insider-outsider perceptions (e.g., researchers position practitioners in need of their expertise; partners position collaborators as working under and for them). In these instances, the RPP runs the risk of perpetuating a traditional suspicion of researchers coming in "telling us what to do" (Weddle et al., 2021, p. 5). One RPP expert offered a potential strategy to mitigate that risk:

> "I think sometimes . . . an RPP can go in and the typical players or the typical organizations whose voices are often heard come to mind or come to the forefront as being interested and available. But I think, also, a community asset–mapping tool can help you think, or help a planning team think, broadly about the range of different individuals, groups who have or have not been at the table in the past."
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> *— RPP Expert*

One RPP leader illustrated how RPPs gain legitimacy when key stakeholders, public opinion leaders, and policymakers view the partnership as responsive to the needs of the communities it serves:

> "I think that [our RPP] has done a good job of having a nice mix of a variety of stakeholders. . . . that's one of our values as a group, that we really do want to ensure equity of voice to inform the agenda. We don't want to be perceived as just some group who's sitting up in the ivory tower somewhere and making decisions."
>
> *— RPP Leader*

For an RPP to achieve its goals and aims, it must commit to continually building capacity for researchers and practitioners to engage in partnership work. Informing and influencing improvement efforts takes many forms and goes beyond instrumental use of the research findings by practitioners or the development of co-designed research efforts by researchers. Some additional forms of impact include organizational changes, changes in thinking and

considerations, differences in policies or ways of doing work, and new conversations about other problems of practice or challenges that might be addressed through research efforts. As a result of these adaptations, the ways in which people work also evolve and adapt. One RPP leader described the changes that resulted from responsivity:

> "The researchers do their work differently, and the policymakers do their work differently because of the way we approached this."
>
> – *RPP Leader*

A responsive research agenda reflects absorptive capacity of researchers, practitioners, and partner organizations to engage in partnership work (Farrell et al., 2022). The agenda also drives boundary practices—the places where partnership work occurs—to enable people, ideas, and resources to flow easily to improve the absorptive capacity of partners. RPP experts and leaders emphasized many of the strategies offered by Farrell et al. (2022) as successful ways to assess and develop the absorptive capacity of potential partners, researchers, and practitioners:

- Engaging relevant prior knowledge about a problem to assess distance and overlap in expertise of partners and researchers

- Establishing robust communication pathways within and across participating organizations

- Mobilizing organizational resources to engage productively at boundaries of research and practice

- Attending strategically to the expertise available to the partnership and identifying gaps and potential opportunities to strengthen boundary practices

- Engaging expertise, developing robust communication pathways, mobilizing resources, deploying strategic leadership practices to identify, and linking new ideas with current initiatives

One RPP leader offered the following strategy for increasing absorptive capacity and ensuring inclusivity at the same time:

> "So again . . . [depending on the project] . . . we will engage all the right people that have the relevant knowledge or they're working on parallel initiatives or that should inform us. All of our stuff is collaborative, and we have different players that provide a different perspective. So, I mean, I could go through every project, but there's not a single project on our list that we don't have multiple organizations involved in."
>
> – *RPP Leader*

Infrastructure and Institutionalizing Practices

Developing infrastructure and institutionalizing the practice of partnership is necessary to establish and maintain the RPP (Desimone et al., 2016). Practices such as standing meetings, clear roles and responsibilities for all members of the RPP, and shared goals provide day-to-day stability and consistency for the RPP members. These practices provide a strong foundation for the RPP to realize its mission, vision, and charter and can intentionally hold the partnership accountable for engaging in mutually beneficial efforts.

RPP experts highlighted the importance of institutionalizing practices as opportunities to build and strengthen trust and foster a productive partnering environment and that these boundary practices play valuable roles throughout the life of the RPP. Indeed, many interviewees noted that these institutionalizing practices helped them navigate periods of uncertainty, such as leadership changes and changes to RPP goals and priorities. RPP scholarship underscored the importance of formalizing brokerage roles to ensure consistent and continual communication across research–practice boundaries. One RPP leader emphasized the importance communication plays in maintaining strong institutional practices:

> "There needs to be somebody who wakes up every day thinking about communications. And not dissemination, not making reports available to wide audiences, but who really thinks strategically about what it takes to get people to help form research and be informed by research. It has to be both of those, and it needs to be somebody who really gets that and makes sure it's their job every day, to make that happen."
>
> – *RPP Leader*

Additional institutionalizing practices mentioned by RPP experts include the following:

- Standing, regular meetings

- Approvals of scopes of work

- Clear roles and responsibilities

- Concrete research agendas with norms, protocols, and routines for handling research requests

- Established memorandums of understanding (MOUs), statements of work, strategic plans, data-sharing agreements, and so on

Finally, RPP interviewees emphasized and literature highlights that the identity of the RPP is critical to a successful launch. The identity of an RPP includes a negotiation of purposes, roles, and products—all of which shape the RPP model in action (Farrell et al., 2022). RPP scholars emphasized that shared goals do not equate to shared meaning, which will be revealed through

tension and conflict as research projects are pursued and findings are disseminated. In particular, Farrell et al. (2019) and other researchers offer several key strategies for supporting the development of identity:

- Leveraging existing research that conveys consensus in the field across researchers and practitioners (Hopkins et al., 2019)

- Developing shared and common languages with which to talk about issues facing partners (Phelps, 2019) and committing to clearly defining terms related to equity and justice (e.g., equitable teaching, power, and culturally sustaining pedagogy; Vetter et al., 2022)

- Having partners engage in intentional and regular reflection of organizational identity and roles, especially during turnover; significant changes in policy and practice landscapes; and shifts in goals and aims (Weddle et al., 2021)

- Thinking expansively about what kinds of projects and methodologies might disrupt practices that normalize or render invisible existing inequities and center nondominant voices and experiences (Vetter et al., 2022)

- Working diligently to elevate the perspectives of practitioners and partner organizations as valuable sources and equal partners in identifying research questions and projects

Although infrastructure—a home, staff, space, and resources—is less impactful than practices on the enduring success of an RPP, infrastructure is a necessary component to consider. Research is the leading activity of RPPs (Farrell et al., 2022), and interviewees stressed that, for research to occur and be successful, RPPs need to invest in infrastructure and supports. Specifically, the interviewees shared that having standardized systems and processes for data-use agreements and research-project approvals is critical for research to occur. Interviewees also emphasized the importance of investing time to collaborate on communication and dissemination plans to ensure that the activities and outcomes of RPPs are accessible to multiple audiences and to demonstrate the contributions of the RPP. Research-side partners noted the need for multiple and diverse types of funding to support research activities and the RPP infrastructure. RPP interviewees emphasized the importance of securing funding for general operating costs and the infrastructure of the RPP (e.g., staff time for relationship building, communications, administration, grant development, management, and data management). Putting these conditions in place can allow for an RPP to serve as a source of stability in tumultuous environments.

New RPPs Benefit From a Planning Period

To plan, launch, and sustain a new RPP, several key conditions must be met. However, knowing where to begin or how to prioritize initial steps may seem daunting. Based on what we learned,

we suggest that newly forming RPPs will benefit from an intentional planning period to lay the groundwork for the RPP; an ongoing focus on building trust among researchers, partners, and the communities the RPP will serve; and open-mindedness about the design and structure of the RPP to meet the needs of stakeholders. Attending to each of the aforementioned common elements during a planning period will provide a strong foundation for making the case for the RPP and ensure work can continue to move forward as obstacles inevitably arise during launching and sustaining the partnership. Setting aside 1 to 2 years at the onset for planning and learning from other RPP leaders will enable newer RPPs to capitalize on lessons learned and potentially avoid—or at least mitigate—common challenges that RPPs experience. Planning periods are absolutely critical time frames for building trust and including stakeholders and diverse voices from the beginning, while keeping in mind the local context and goals of the RPP. These periods are also opportunities to engage in conversations about equity and center the efforts of the RPP on the questions posed by the broader community.

> "One thing I have seen be helpful is a planning year, or a sort of year zero- or two-year zeros, sort of prelaunch. In terms of being able to be really intentional about exactly what this question is. Who are your stakeholders? What's the 'why' that's going to be guiding this work, and who most impacted by it? Or whose lives, livelihoods, are you trying to shift? And, in that case, bringing those people into the voice, the voicing of the agenda setting, and what that means and what that looks like."
>
> *– RPP Expert*

The planning period is a time to establish shared agreement and consensus about the mission, vision, and goals of the RPP and to establish the foundations of how its leaders and members will work together. The planning period should start small, with a few partners and projects, particularly those projects that can be quick wins and build momentum. Interviewees highlighted the growth of the RPP field and the existing tools and resources as advantages that newer or newly established RPPs can take advantage of during this period.

> "I think the biggest thing is to not . . . start from scratch or ground zero. I think the difference now between 20 years ago is that there's a community of RPPs that has emerged. I think 20 years ago it did feel more like, 'Am I doing this thing all by myself?' This is really different. And I think there's, as a field, there's resources and colleagues to lean on and best practices to grow from. There's, like on the NNERPP website, there's lots of different examples of ways of setting up data, sharing agreements, MOUs. That should not be something that you have to start from scratch."
>
> *– RPP Leader*

In addition to setting aside a planning period and creating the necessary conditions for embracing an inclusive leadership, enacting a responsive research agenda, building infrastructure, and institutionalizing practices, researchers and practitioners need to embrace

the spirit of RPP work. This process includes acknowledging that, individually, they may not yet have all the skills, knowledge, and capacity to lead the RPP, but RPP members can develop these assets together over time by leaning into their curiosity and maintaining a sustained commitment to meeting the needs of partners and communities the RPP serves.

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Appendix A Methods

Our research drew from a purposeful sample of RPP experts and scholars, as well as a comprehensive review of relevant literature to examine the facilitating factors and common barriers faced by RPPs in their early stages.

The interview sample included 18 RPP experts, including members of NNERRP and RPP scholars. Our interviews represented 10 RPPs, ranging from RPPs that have been in existence for more than 20 years to RPPs launched within the last 2 years. Our interviews included 14 research and practice RPP leaders to develop a balanced picture of the requirements for planning and launching an RPP. We also interviewed four experts in the scholarship and practice of RPP work. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and occurred July–August 2022. Semi-structured interview protocols were informed by the research literature, guiding questions from the Gates Foundation, and a toolkit developed by Scholz et al. (2021) to assess the health of an RPP which was aligned to Henrick et al.'s, (2017) framework. on the five dimensions of effective RPPs. Following the conclusion of the interviews, researchers used inductive coding to identify themes and findings.

A comprehensive review of the RPP literature guided interview analyses and examine for alignment with what we heard from experts. We reviewed 34 articles about RPPs, primarily authored by academic researchers; two of the articles included practitioner partners as co-authors. The dates of the studies ranged from 2013 to 2022, and articles were sourced from foundations that focus on RPPs and equitable data use in education (e.g., William T. Grant Foundation); academic journals using combinations of keywords research–practice partnership, P20W data use, SEA RPP, and equity; and articles referenced in existing literature. Two articles discussed statewide RPPs, and the remaining studies focused on schools or districts with university and/or nonprofit partners. All papers focused on RPPs that were based in the United States.

RPP scholarship in the field of education has increased significantly during the past 10 years. Nevertheless, significant overlap remains regarding questions asked, research design and data collection, and the concepts and frameworks used to study RPPs. To date, the scholarship on RPPs tends to focus on individual, organizational, and political contexts that shape the activities of RPPs and enable or constrain success. Studies draw heavily from political, organizational, knowledge-utilization, evidence-based practice, and systems-thinking theories and concepts. Much of the literature relies on qualitative research to describe RPPs and aims to examine the facilitating conditions and barriers that RPPs face. Additional aims of the literature include a focus on measuring the success and outcomes associated with RPP approaches. Research on whether RPPs met their stated goals or attempted to measure their impacts in broader community settings was not the primary focus of this review and therefore was not a focus of

any of our reviewed studies. More recent literature (i.e., since 2019) has explicitly addressed issues of equity in RPPs.

AIR coded interview findings and literature using the five dimensions of the Henrick et al. (2017) framework for healthy RPPs: building trust and cultivating relationships, conducting rigorous research to inform action, supporting the partner practice organization in achieving its goals, producing knowledge that can inform improvement efforts, and building research and practice organizations' capacity to engage in the work. In an updated article, the authors of the framework argue that, as RPPs work toward each dimension of effectiveness, they are also, in fact, working toward developing equitable relationships between researchers and practitioners, supporting equitable outcomes for students, and developing equitable systems by reconceptualizing how research and practice institutions and communities work together to achieve shared goals and remove persistent barriers (Henrick et al., 2019). This framework provided clear markers for the organizing principles and high-impact practices of healthy RPPs that enabled us to surface a set of themes that addressed the question of what conditions support designing an RPP that centers equity in its design, is inclusive of diverse stakeholder perspectives and ultimately meets the needs of the community it serves.

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