

Spotlighting promising practices from the 2021 Making Schools Work Conference

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How Classroom Teachers Can Change the Trajectory of a Child

By Tim Shaughnessy and Diane James, SREB



Baruti Kafele presenting at the 2019 Making Schools Work Conference.

Creating equitable access to high-quality learning experiences for every student is at the top of most educators' minds, but there is no universal solution for how to achieve this critical goal and ensure more students graduate ready for further education, rewarding careers and fulfilling lives.

Former teacher and principal Baruti Kafele of Principal Kafele Consulting, LLC, is a highly acclaimed expert, author and speaker on educational leadership and equitable school and classroom practices that promote high engagement and achievement for every student.

During his featured session at the 2021 Making Schools Work Conference, Kafele shared how the ability to establish equitable school and classroom practices requires an *equity mindset teacher* — one who challenges themselves every day in how they see, treat and relate to students. He suggests that teachers work to recognize and acknowledge the unconscious and implicit or explicit biases they may bring to the classroom and meet students where and as they are.

“Who you see when you look at students plays a significant role in who they become ... If you don’t see phenomenal, if you don’t see amazing, but on the other hand, you see less than, they know and ... it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy,” asserts Kafele.

Recognizing Students’ Unique Needs

According to Kafele, an equity mindset begins not with training or specific practices, but when individuals make the decision to become educators *because they love children*. At that point, future educators position themselves to see students’ individuality and meet their needs: It’s “that compassion that you have for each individual learner. I genuinely want to meet the needs of each learner in my space,” reflects Kafele.

To meet each students’ needs, Kafele urges teachers to recognize:

- That *each student* can **learn at the highest levels**
- That children must be met where and as they are in a **barrier-free learning environment**. An example of placing a barrier on a student’s growth is when a teacher predetermines what a child’s highest learning level can be.
- The **individuality** of every student in the classroom. Each student has their own ways of learning, academically and socially. For example:
 - o Each student has their own way of learning, thinking and making sense out of and processing new information.
 - o Each student brings to the classroom their own unique set of experiences, realities, challenges, obstacles, interests, goals and aspirations that impact their learning and who they are socially.
- The **cultural identity** of each student
- That each student has their own **voice**
- That each student is **someone special**

Kafele believes there are three core pillars or non-negotiables to ensuring that school and classroom practices promote equitable access to quality learning experiences that recognize and celebrate students’ individual identities and needs.

Three Pillars or Non-Negotiables

1. **Student individuality** — Teachers create a classroom environment in which students are visible, present and engaged as the individuals they are and not on the basis of a group identity.
2. **Student cultural identity** — Teachers celebrate race and culture instead of trying to turn a blind eye to them. According to Kafele, although some teachers say they don’t see a student’s race or ethnic background, such “color-blind thinking” limits teachers’ ability to recognize students’ identities and help them explore and understand their history.
3. **Student voice** — Effective teachers empower students to develop a strong voice in the classroom and offer them a platform to express their thoughts, ideas, beliefs and perspectives. Kafele contends there is a correlation between a student’s voice and their essence. “If they think their *voice* doesn’t matter, they don’t think *they* matter,” he says.



In this video, Baruti Kafele asks teachers to reflect on who they see when they look at students of color.

Relevance Matters

To better reach and teach each student, Kafele urges teachers to make themselves relevant in their students’ worlds. Teachers might ask themselves, “How do *I* look at the world in contrast to how *my students* look at the world?”

Relevant instructional strategies help, too. Students need to understand why information is useful and how it relates to their world — now and in the future. When course content isn't relevant, students don't hear it. Make it relatable or "you will lose your audience," says Kafele.

“Are my students at an advantage because I’m their teacher?”

Words Matter

Teachers need to understand not only how they influence how students see themselves, but also the impact they have on who and what students become.

The powerful — and potentially damaging — role of language cannot be overstated. For example, it's common in education to talk about at-risk students. But Kafele calls this an example of “deficit” speech that, consciously or not, creates a “deficit environment” in which students take on a deficit identity. Instead, Kafele challenges teachers to think about what strengths they as teachers bring to their classrooms and ask: “Are my students at an advantage because I’m their teacher?”

By committing to “daily change” through an ongoing process of self-reflection, self-assessment, self-adjustment and self-improvement, Kafele asserts that teachers can ensure that students feel heard when they say: “Believe in me as I am, with everything you’ve got; get to know me beyond who I am in the classroom; prove to me that you care about me and that you are committed to me; challenge me to reach my full potential; and expose me to my history.”

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Learn with Principal Kafele at the **2022 Making Schools Work Conference**, July 19-22, in Grapevine, Texas.

Closing Keynote and General Session

“Just One Educator Can Completely Alter the Trajectory of a Child”

Texas Ballroom

4 p.m. Central, Thursday, July 21, 2022

Deep Dive Session

Texas Ballroom AB

8:30 – 10:30 a.m. Central, Thursday July 21, 2022

Book-Signing in the Education Marketplace

Grapevine Ballroom, Booth 109

10:30 – 11:30 a.m. Central, Thursday July 21, 2022

Rethink Discipline With Positive Alternatives to Suspension

By Zach Riffell and Jahana Martin, SREB



Steph Jensen, director of community contracts for Boys Town

Suspending students from school as a form of discipline does little to reduce future misbehavior, and it certainly doesn't improve academic success, studies show. Many educators and parents hold that suspensions have negative effects on students, such as decreased academic performance and workforce readiness, due to the loss of critical instructional time. Most suspended students also become repeat offenders, with detrimental consequences for students *and* communities.

Boys Town, a nonprofit dedicated to changing the way America cares for children and families, addresses these challenges by empowering schools to develop positive alternatives to suspension that keep more students in school, improve safety across campuses and strengthen communities as a result.

Steph Jensen, director of community contracts for Boys Town National Community Supports, explains that in most schools, a code of conduct provides a model of progressive discipline that details the severity of various offenses as well as policies for repeat offenders. Interventions typically begin with informal warnings before escalating to written warnings and eventually some type of removal from the classroom. In-school suspensions generally last fewer than 10 days; out-of-school suspensions are usually over 10 days; and expulsion removes the student from school for the remainder of the year.

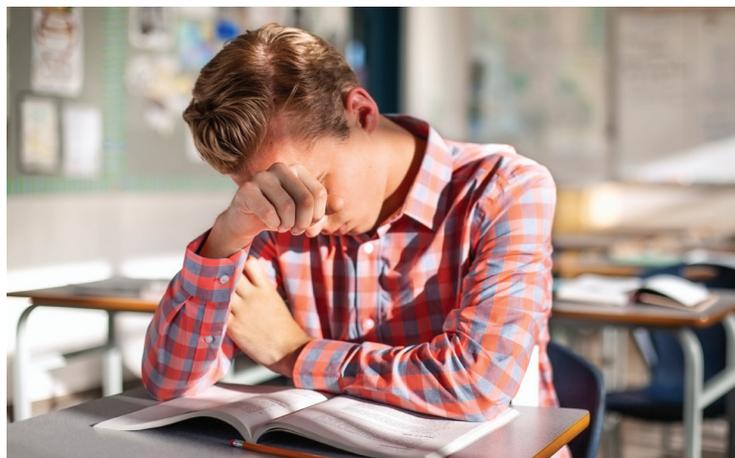
Why Suspensions?

Jensen points out that the increase in suspensions nationwide may be linked to zero tolerance policies implemented in the 1990s in response to the need to address rising school violence and increase school safety. Such policies were originally intended to target the most egregious violent behaviors, such as possession of guns and knives, but they quickly started to be applied to lower-level threats such as using inappropriate language and cheating. As a result, American students are being suspended more often.

Why Suspensions Don't Work

If a school's goal is to use suspension to decrease student misbehavior, removing students from the classroom is likely to have the opposite effect. Boys Town research found that one in-school suspension or out-of-school suspension often leads to multiple out-of-school suspensions. This cycle "disproportionately impacts our students of color," notes Jensen. She found the same disparities occurred with students with disabilities.

Jensen maintains that when zero tolerance policies are applied to lower-level misbehaviors, schools create an environment in which students are not in school, do not learn critical social and academic skills, and lack adult supervision. This increases the possibility they will engage in more dangerous, unhealthy and risk-taking behaviors outside of school — behaviors that often lead to incarceration. Negative academic impacts occur as well: Jensen found that students who have been suspended have lower reading scores.



Suspensions also lead to an increase in the school dropout rate and a decrease in workforce readiness. "We see these zero tolerance policies have an overall negative impact not only on the schools and the individual students, but they also start to affect our communities," Jensen maintains.

Positive Alternatives to Suspension

Boys Town intervention strategies begin when students' infractions are small, before they grow into more serious offenses, says Denise Pratt, Boys Town senior national training consultant. Boys Town developed the **Positive Alternatives to Suspension program** to help reduce suspensions by helping students demonstrate appropriate behaviors to achieve both social and academic success while retaining safety for all students and staff.

Rather than taking a punitive approach, the Positive Alternatives to Suspension program aims to:

- Problem-solve ongoing problematic behavior
- Teach prosocial replacement behaviors
- Promote academic achievement
- Serve as a deterrent to suspension



Denise Pratt, senior national training consultant, Boys Town

When implementing the Positive Alternative to Suspension Program in the districts they serve, Boys Town found an overall reduction in suspension days. For example, Pratt notes that Omaha Public Schools achieved a 23% reduction in the total number of suspension days, a 43% reduction in students earning multiple suspensions, a 78% reduction in special education student suspensions, and a 40% reduction in minority student suspensions.

Similar to in-school suspension, the Boys Town program removes students from class, but with the specific goal of learning new skills for a successful return to the classroom. This requires teachers to hold high expectations for students and show low tolerance for behaviors that typically occur in the in-school suspension environment. Students are expected to engage and participate in the activities that help them identify their behaviors that resulted in suspension and learn an appropriate replacement behavior.

High Expectations, Low Tolerances

To achieve a positive school culture with high expectations and low tolerance for misbehavior, faculty and staff use tools such as reflective essays and teaching specific skills to help students process the events that led to their suspension, practice replacement skills and target skill and performance deficits.



Reflective essays and writing activities prompt students to think critically about what happened and what they can do differently in the future. “We have found that taking a behavioral approach and teaching social skills gets us the best results,” says Pratt.

Think Sheet writing templates are a proactive strategy for a multi-tiered response to student behavior. Students are prompted to think about what they can do to prevent the current situation from recurring and consider what good things might occur when they make different decisions.

Focusing on increasing the use of prosocial behaviors helps schools maintain a safe physical and emotional environment. Students also receive individualized plans. “They’re not cookie-cutter kids, so our plans for them shouldn’t be cookie-cutter plans,” says Pratt.

Contacts: Denise Pratt, denise.pratt@boystown.org; Steph Jensen, steph.jensen@boystown.org, Twitter: [@boystown](https://twitter.com/boystown)

Teaching Employability and Workforce Readiness Skills

By Ken Mason and Diane James, SREB

Many students who graduate from high school with a diploma in hand feel ready for the workforce, but are they? And if they graduate with their diploma *and* an industry credential, do they have the employability skills needed to get a job?

Leaders and teachers at **Boonslick Technical Education Center** in **Missouri** realized their center had a gap between students’ readiness for work and their ability to get a job. As a result, BTEC educators immersed themselves in teaching the employability skills that make a job candidate desirable — such as working well with others, being able to communicate and having a positive attitude — skills that employers value and are transferrable and useful in every job.

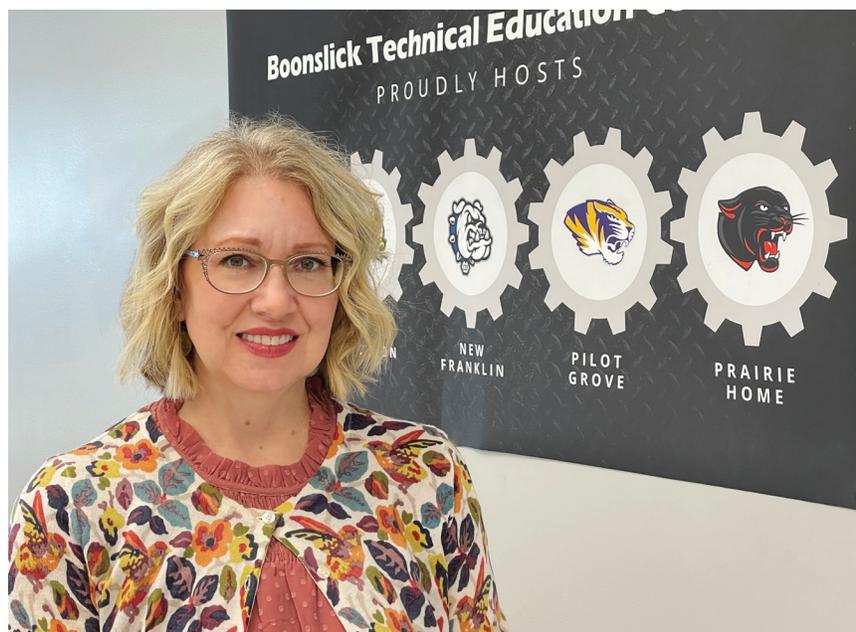
BTEC is a shared-time center serving five local schools that offers instruction in eight career areas. Director Carri Risner’s experience as a former chef, restaurant owner and culinary arts instructor and leader helped her to see how important it is for students to possess employability skills.

Top Employability Skills

A key component that jumpstarted the center’s employability immersion initiative was a survey Risner created outlining 13 of the most-requested employability skills. She administered it to local industry leaders and staff with the goal of prioritizing the top six identifiable skills.

Risner discovered that whereas her teachers were focused on traditional problem solving and critical thinking skills, industry leaders’ focus was quite different, highlighting more of the so-called “soft skills” needed in the workplace. The top six skills named by employers who responded to her survey were:

1. Positive attitude
2. Reliability
3. Integrity
4. Initiative/Adaptability
5. Responsible
6. Communicative



Carri Risner, BTEC Director

BTEC STUDENTS GEARED FOR SUCCESS



BTEC's marketing graphic lists the six employability skills local employers value most.

"It was a really defining moment that helped us move forward," says Risner. "This would have gone off the rails real quick if we hadn't done this [survey]." After conducting the survey, BTEC held professional development sessions to review survey results and get direct feedback from industry leaders on why they reported that these six skills were so important. The survey not only opened the door to building and expanding strong partnerships with business and industry, it also helped educators better embed employability skills into their curriculum.

BTEC developed a promotional graphic and tagline — *BTEC Students Geared for Success* — that convey how the center focuses on the top six employability skills employers named. The graphic is now used in promotional materials and recruitment videos.

Risner and her team also established advisory committees comprised of local business, industry and community leaders, postsecondary instructors and others for BTEC's eight career areas. Advisory committee members bring relevance to the center's CTE programs and share the changing workforce needs that are impacting the region. The committee also advises teachers on the academic, technical and workplace skills students will need to thrive in their respective career fields.

Workplace Readiness Initiatives

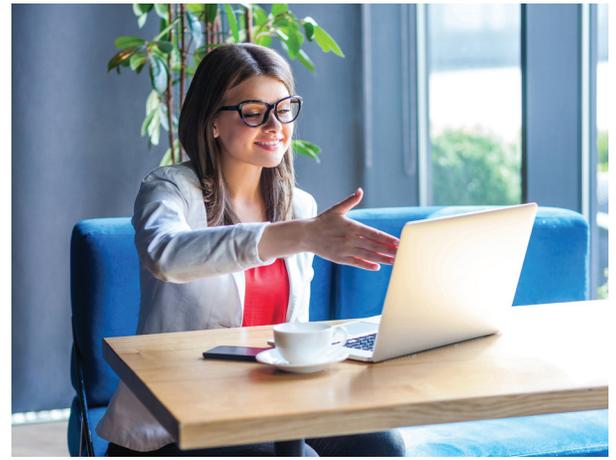
Risner wanted to communicate the importance of workplace readiness schoolwide through the look and feel of the building and the overall learning experience. To better simulate an authentic workplace environment for students, BTEC undertook the workplace readiness initiatives below.

Redesigned program marketing materials were re-imagined with students and parents in mind. They included more colorful poster-sized graphics of program offerings with less text and fewer statistics. Posters and inspirational messages were professionally designed and adorned the walls and bulletin boards outside program areas.

These materials served a dual purpose of educating business, industry and community partners about what BTEC offers and how they can partner for success. For example, when companies help hire and train BTEC students, they expand their pool of qualified and technically proficient young people entering the workforce. "We're helping them, but we need their help as well," says Risner.

Breakfast with business at BTEC. Beginning in the 2020-21 school year, local business leaders visited the school and provided breakfast for students before the school day began. During the meal, leaders and students discussed an array of topics including financial literacy, budgeting, characteristics of a great job candidate and professional dress in the workplace. One local business even gave students a voucher to purchase a professional outfit.

Virtual interviews with industry. Although COVID affected BTEC operations, interactions with business and industry, including mock job interviews, continued via Zoom. Before setting up the interviews, Risner gave students a dry run, allowing them to practice answering questions and receive feedback from teachers and administrators. Risner also created a digital online portfolio for interviews so that students could have something to reference later and self-reflect on their interviews. “They’re not going in [to their interviews] completely unprepared, and they have an answer for how they can meet the needs of that company,” notes Risner.



BTEC’s Employability Summit was designed to give students a flavor of what a professional conference is like. About 270 students attended a half-day event at the center that included the same activities professionals experience: registering online, attending sessions, listening to speakers, playing conference games and winning door prizes. Session topics included on-the-job safety, leadership qualities, online job search tips, scholarships and even how to fill out a tax return, which was the highest attended session. “It was worth it . . . giving students a half-day to really feel and be a future industry professional,” maintains Risner.

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Academics and Exploration Beyond the Classroom

By Quinton Granville, SREB

Relevant social studies instruction inspires students to explore the world and how they fit in it and empowers them to become our next generation of leaders and informed decision-makers.

Required for all students, social studies broadly includes the study of history, cultures, economics, civics, human behavior and much more. SREB and the National Geographic Society both offer teachers tools and strategies that make teaching and learning social studies meaningful and enjoyable. Our [Powerful Social Studies Instructional Practices](#) and [National Geographic’s Resource Library](#) give teachers instructional resources they can use to create experiences that broaden students’ horizons and encourage them to think deeply about who they are and how they can contribute to making a better world.

Powerful Social Studies Instructional Practices

Teacher Behaviors	Student Behaviors	Artifacts
1. An inquiry-focused summative task engages students in completing a standards-based, text-dependent and content-specific product.		
The teacher: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops compelling and supporting questions that align with a grade-level subject’s theme or content • Designs engaging summative and formative performance tasks and alternative products that directly support the mastery of state content and inquiry standards and encompasses the “10 thematic strands of social studies” • Chooses grade-level or higher disciplinary sources that contain the content or concepts students need to answer guiding or supporting questions and complete performance tasks • Gives students “voice and choice” in developing compelling and supporting questions, as appropriate • Designs standards-aligned scoring rubrics and allows student input, as appropriate, to develop appropriate criteria 	The students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop compelling and supporting questions as a foundation for the inquiry process • Can explain the purpose of assignments and the steps they need to take to complete them successfully • Can connect related assignments and products to social studies themes • Find appropriate and relevant sources when conducting independent research or when responding to a task 	Classroom resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include alternative products that allow students flexibility when demonstrating their understanding on performance tasks • Explain summative performance tasks and other criteria for assessing the quality of students’ work • Include disciplinary sources that students can use to complete tasks. These may include print, oral and digital primary and secondary texts, written transcripts, letters, political cartoons, photographs, audio recordings, prints, maps, statistics, graphs, charts, paintings, sculptures, etc. • Include introductory, engaging lesson plans that stage compelling questions and spark students’ interest and curiosity
2. The lesson plan sequence supports or scaffolds learning, enabling students to deepen their understanding and apply disciplinary tools and concepts.		
The teacher: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plans a series of lessons that develop students’ knowledge, disciplinary skills and ability to complete performance tasks • Provides varied opportunities for students to engage with disciplinary tools and concepts • Selects educational tools that support learning • Strategically selects and teaches the disciplinary skills and literacy strategies needed for students to read, interpret and find evidence from sources to complete written tasks 	The students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make connections to other disciplines or previous knowledge • Use inquiry skills¹ to develop questions and sources as part of the learning cycle • Use educational tools to collect and organize new concepts • Work individually and collaboratively, using literacy strategies and inquiry skills, to read and interpret grade-level texts and sources and complete assignments 	Instructional plans: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outline the sequence of instruction to support concept development and retention • Include scaffolding outlines that connect prior learning targets within the unit • Incorporate educational tools, such as graphic organizers, note-taking formats and digital learning tools, like interactive whiteboards, mapping technology and educational technology applications (e.g., Kahoot!, Nearpod, Flipgrid, Quizizz)

1. SREB does not endorse specific technology tools or vendors.

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SREB’s Powerful Social Studies Instructional Practices

SREB’s Social Studies PIPs are more than just a set of best practices for instruction: They offer teachers a complete framework for prioritizing standards-based planning, teaching and learning. Following the PIPs, teachers design standards-aligned instruction and assignments that immerse students in the process of analyzing and evaluating social studies themes. For example, to help students understand how individuals, groups and institutions interact, a teacher might prompt students to consider the types of businesses and business owners who comprise their local city’s business district through the lens of economic inclusiveness and equity and create a proposal for enhancing its practices to promote opportunities for people, entrepreneurs and employees to strengthen their local economy.

As they complete inquiry-focused tasks, students develop literacy skills and hone their ability to identify and cite evidence from credible sources, participate with their peers in lively academic discourse and demonstrate their deeper understanding of historical, social or cultural concepts.

Teachers have a strong influence on how young people respond to human rights or environmental issues. Teachers can use the social studies PIPs to help students approach figures, events and historical, cultural or ecological concepts not as names or dates to be memorized, but actively, as problem-solvers and solution-seekers. Teachers can also spotlight issues affecting their local community and draw on current events to challenge students to conduct research and take informed action to address local, regional or global problems.

National Geographic’s Resource Library

Aligned with [National Geographic’s Learning Framework](#), National Geographic’s rich trove of Pre-K-12 units, lessons, activities and interdisciplinary, multimedia source materials were designed to increase students’ awareness of historical, cultural and ecological issues and inspire them adopt an explorer mindset.



In National Geographic's **Breaking Down Invisible Walls activity**, for example, students in grades six to 12 look at the social boundaries that exist in their communities or schools and discuss ways to cross them. Students take a deep dive into examining how differences contribute to society. Linking this type of activity to SREB's Powerful Social Studies Instructional Practices makes learning more meaningful by providing students with a standards-aligned context for collaborating and engaging in civil discourse.

A Win-Win

By combining SREB's Powerful Social Studies Instructional Practices and National Geographic's interdisciplinary resources, teachers can create captivating instruction and assignments that introduce students to people, places and experiences they might never encounter outside the classroom. Such adventures simultaneously prepare students to not only achieve learning goals but also make a difference in their world.

Learn more: Contact Quinton Granville at quinton.granville@sreb.org.

Dreaming of Summer? Secure Housing and Plan Your MSW2022 Schedule Now!

Sick of the snow and cold weather? Start planning your summer learning and fun by securing hotel accommodations and checking out our online program for the **2022 Making Schools Work Conference**, July 19-22 in Grapevine, Texas.

Conference housing sells out fast, so reserve your rooms today! All conference events will be held at the Gaylord Texan Resort & Convention Center in Grapevine, Texas. Connections Housing acts as the booking agent for our contracted conference hotels. **See our website** for hotel rates, and to reserve a room, call Connections at (404) 842-0000 or (800) 262-9974 OR visit **Connections' website**.

Registration begins at 8 a.m. Central on Tuesday, July 19, 2022. This year, conference activities kick off with sessions at 9 a.m. and our opening general session at 2:30 p.m. The conference ends at noon on Friday, July 22.

Whether you're attending or presenting, **check our online conference program** for the latest information about sessions and special events that you can add to your personal calendar. Look for our conference app soon!



SREB

School Improvement

Making Schools Work Conference

Grapevine, Texas | July 19-22, 2022

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Impact your
students, school
and community.

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