



The Learning for English Academic Proficiency and Success Act: Ensuring Faithful and Timely Implementation

By Conor P. Williams, Ph.D. and Colleen Gross Ebinger

Commissioned by The McKnight Foundation

Foreword

This report was commissioned by The McKnight Foundation, as part of McKnight’s “Food for Thought” series — independent essays and research that help inform our understanding of the fields in which we operate and our related program strategies.

McKnight’s early literacy program supports efforts to dramatically increase the percentage of third-grade readers, especially among populations underserved in our schools. For three years, we have partnered with the University of Chicago’s Urban Education Institute and seven Twin Cities elementary schools — we call them our Pathway Schools — to infuse deep supports aimed at improving literacy instruction, assessment, and school leadership.

In our schools, we see a reflection of our community and its growing diversity. In particular, nearly 60 percent of students in our seven Pathway Schools do not speak English at home. We are consistently impressed by the dedication our school staff shows for supporting these students, but — given the unique needs of students working to build literacy skills in two languages (their own and English) — we also see these staff members struggle to understand how best to develop their students’ academic potential.

That’s why we were glad to see Minnesota’s policymakers turn their attention to English Language Learners in the last session. The Learning for English Academic Proficiency and Success (LEAPS) Act represents one of the nation’s most comprehensive pieces of legislation aimed at supporting language learners, calling for — among other things — improved teacher preparation and professional development, assessment, instruction, and family engagement. However, the potential positive impact of this policy is in its implementation. And there are implementation hurdles ahead for LEAPS.

In August, we convened nearly 40 experts from across Minnesota and its diverse communities to share their thoughts on how state agencies, school districts, charters, and colleges of education can rise to meet the ambitious challenge set by LEAPS. We also consulted with Conor P. Williams, Ph.D., of the New America Foundation, who helped us understand LEAPS in the context of a national movement. In this brief, you will find the collected wisdom of both local and national thought leaders. We anticipate that the guidance presented here will help Minnesota lead the nation in developing one of its greatest assets — English Language Learners.

**Neal Cuthbert, Vice President of Program
The McKnight Foundation**

The Learning for English Academic Proficiency and Success (LEAPS) Act: Ensuring Faithful and Timely Implementation

This brief was written by Conor P. Williams, Ph.D., and Colleen Gross Ebinger. It incorporates the considerable expertise, advice and insight of over 40 local leaders and practitioners, whose contributions are acknowledged at the conclusion of this document.

The LEAPS Act: An Overview

During the 2014 legislative session, lawmakers passed the nation’s most comprehensive legislation in support of English Learners (ELs). The law has three principal goals for all EL students: a) academic English proficiency, b) grade-level content knowledge, and c) multilingual skills development. Chief among the mandates is the requirement that *all* teachers be skilled in teaching ELs. Delivering these goals will require action at every level of the educational system: state agencies and the Board of Teaching, teacher preparation programs at institutions of higher education, school districts and charter schools, and classroom teachers and school staff.

The Need: Multilingualism as an Asset

Over 67,000 EL students are currently enrolled in Minnesota schools.¹ The largest populations include Latino, Somali, and Hmong students. In the past 20 years, this number has increased by 300 percent, making ELs the fastest growing part of Minnesota’s student population. These individuals bring both unique linguistic assets and academic needs to their classrooms. Indeed, Minnesota ranks 15th in the nation for the number of languages spoken by its students.²

But according to the Minnesota Department of Education, nearly half of EL students do not graduate from high school, representing a major loss of talent and potential that the state cannot afford if we wish to maintain our economic competitiveness and high standard of living. Further, emerging brain science indicates that, beyond the immediately visible communication advantages, bilingualism and multilingualism are linked with such desirable outcomes as stronger executive control systems in the brain and the delayed onset of dementia and other aging-related illnesses.³

1 “The Human Capital Landscape for Twin Cities Teachers.” The McKnight Foundation, August 2014.

2 <http://www.minnpost.com/learning-curve/2014/04/leaps-act-calls-sea-change-thinking-about-language-skills-and-teaching>

3 <http://www.americanradioworks.org/segments/this-is-your-brain-on-language/>

Minnesota must invest in its English Learners. Provided with the necessary support to succeed in our education system, the diversity of our EL population offers the state a cornucopia of linguistic talent. Their native fluency in some of the world’s most critical languages could be a boon for our business and civic sectors. If it plays its cards right, Minnesota could become a national leader in producing a multilingual, globally aware citizenry and workforce.

The Opportunity: Minnesota’s Learning for English Academic Proficiency and Success (LEAPS) Act sets a high bar for native language supports

H.F. 2397 sets a high bar for state policy excellence as far as support for ELs’ native language is concerned. Specifically, the law treats ELs’ proficiency in their native language as an asset to be cultivated — and backs up this approach with specific policies. Here are several of the highlights:

- The law requires districts to conduct “reading assessments...in the predominant native languages of district students.”⁴
- The law requires districts to collect and publish additional data on ELs’ proficiency in their native languages as part of schools’ performance reports.⁵
- The law establishes “bilingual” and “multilingual” seals for high school graduates proficient in two or more languages.⁶

While the law is a major step forward for prioritizing ELs’ language development and academic needs, the next challenge is to ensure that it is implemented faithfully. A number of the law’s provisions set outstanding priorities for teachers, administrators, schools, districts, and teacher training programs that aim to eliminate the present opportunity and achievement gaps. However, the degree to which practitioners are prepared to implement these priorities remains unclear. Minnesota confronts deeply embedded cultural and structural barriers, as well as very direct implementation hurdles. Both sets of challenges must be addressed to fully meet the aspirations LEAPS articulates for our English Learners.

4 H.F. 2397, Section 6, Subdivision 2.

5 H.F. 2397, Section 10.

6 H.F. 2397, Section 3, Subdivision 1b.

Cultural and Structural Challenges to Implementation

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge that the necessary conditions of fostering educational systems supportive of EL students go far beyond the requirements laid out in this legislation. Specifically, two characteristics of the larger education system complicate the attempts to offer better support for EL students. They include:

Very few teachers of color: Statewide, only 3.5 percent of Minnesota’s public school teachers are people of color, while the student population is nearly 30 percent children of color.⁷ In Minneapolis and Saint Paul Public Schools, 64 and 76 percent of these districts’ respective students are children of color while only 14 and 16 percent of the teaching force is composed of people of color.⁸ Expanding the pipeline of teachers of color is critical for two reasons: First, teachers of color often have personal experience with the very same challenges that their students face, and thus can be better prepared to help students navigate these life challenges. Second, they serve as role models for their students, helping students to picture themselves as teachers, leaders, and experts.

There are many things that need to be done to make the teaching profession more welcoming and accessible to people of color — for example, eliminating Minnesota’s restrictive reciprocity requirements to help attract diverse candidates from out of state and supporting “Grow Your Own” programs within districts and communities.⁹ However, this is an issue that affects many more students than ELs alone, and it was not explicitly addressed by the LEAPS legislation.

Lack of cultural responsiveness across the educational system: Our current educational system was largely designed 150 years ago for a different time and purpose. Our state has changed dramatically, but our educational system has changed little. Of chief importance is making the system culturally responsive at all levels — from classroom teachers and teacher candidates to district and charter leaders to teacher preparation programs to state officials. It is our collective responsibility to create a system that effectively serves all.

7 <http://www.mprnews.org/story/2014/07/31/minnesota-school-diverse-staff>

8 Minnesota Department of Education, 2012-2013 school year.

9 Illinois’ statewide Grow Your Own program is often cited as one effective model: http://www.growyourown-teachers.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=127&Itemid=143

Implementation Challenges & Possible Approaches

While implementing LEAPS will require efforts by a variety of actors, there are three particular challenges that state, district, charter, and higher education leaders will need to address together.

Issue A: Strong native language assessments are woefully underdeveloped

While the law's emphasis on native language proficiency is critically important, converting this priority into meaningful measurement of ELs' language abilities is a complicated task. To begin with, districts, charters and educators should be careful to distinguish between assessments designed to measure native language proficiency and those that measure *progress towards* native language proficiency. With this in mind, districts and charters will need to find appropriate assessments of ELs' native language proficiency. For instance, assessments such as the WIDA-PODER and the STEP™ Literacy Assessment have recently been developed and field-tested for native Spanish-speaking ELs. However, it will be more difficult to find reliable and valid assessments for ELs with native languages that are underrepresented nationally, such as Somali or Hmong. It should be noted that experts generally caution against simply translating English-based exams into ELs' native languages, as this usually undermines assessments' validity and reliability — especially when measuring ELs' literacy.¹⁰

Possible Approach: The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) should clarify what districts and charters must measure to satisfy the law's requirements regarding ELs' native language abilities. It should then identify — and if necessary fund the development of — valid and reliable literacy assessments in Minnesota's most common native languages. Given the potential costs of developing a variety of effective assessments in multiple languages, Minnesota should review existing assessments already in use in many states and adopt or adapt them. In addition, Minnesota should explore the option of partnering with other states with similar student populations, such as California or Washington to evaluate and/or support the development of native language literacy assessments. Such a partnership would spread costs and could also be used as a foundation for pursuing an Enhanced Assessment Grant (EAG)¹¹ from the U.S. Department of Education. Furthermore, given that Minnesota is home to a number of foundations with an interest in supporting ELs' academic growth, the state should leverage their knowledge and resources as part of this process.¹²

10 *Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How*, ed. Catherine E. Snow and Susan B. Van Hemel, Committee on Developmental Outcomes and Assessments for Young Children, National Research Council (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2008), 246–7, 249–256. WIDA-PODER, <http://www.wida.us/assessment/poder.aspx>.

11 Enhanced Assessment Grants (EAGs) are discretionary grants offered by the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. To learn more, visit <http://www.ed.gov/category/program/enhanced-assessment-grants>.

12 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Section 6111.

Finally, districts and charters should consider using family surveys and interviews to connect with ELs’ families. These can help them assess the exposure, use, and proficiency of ELs’ native language at home and other venues. This information is a key supplement to in-school assessments of students’ native language proficiency and can be of significant assistance in developing supportive learning environments for ELs.

Next Steps, Native Language Assessments:

Action Item	Responsible	Together with	Description
Identify priority languages and potential partner states	MDE	Chairs of House & Senate Education Committees	Identify priority languages for which to develop assessments; for each language, identify states with high number of speakers; prioritize states for outreach; contact states to consider partnership; consider learning trip to visit states.
Explore use of Enhanced Assessment Grants (EAGs) to fund language assessments	MDE	Philanthropic supporters; Chairs of Senate & House Education Committees	Reach out to U.S. Department of Education to learn about its current funding priorities and formally suggest a round of competitive grants to states to develop native-language assessments for ELs.
Review current EAG guidelines	MDE	Philanthropic supporters; Chairs of Senate & House Education Committees	Once annual RFP is released, review all requirements and determine both current capacity available and additional capacity required to complete a competitive application.
Decide whether to pursue an EAG	MDE	Chairs of Senate & House Education Committees	Upon consideration of information gathered through prior action steps, decide whether to pursue a grant.
If yes, develop work plan	MDE	Philanthropic supporters, Chairs of Senate & House Education Committees	If MDE decides to pursue an Enhanced Assessment Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, a work plan will be developed to guide entire submission process. This will include clarifying what elements districts and charters will need to measure.
If no, develop alternative implementation strategy	MDE	Philanthropic supporters, Chairs of Senate & House Education Committees	If not pursuing an EAG, MDE will need to explore alternatives funding options. This would include: developing cost estimates, exploring legislative appropriation options, exploring options for philanthropic funding.

Issue B: Professional development must rise to meet the challenge

The law directs districts and charters to provide staff development to help teachers support ELs' native language development — with a particular focus on literacy. While ongoing training in instructional strategies for supporting ELs could be very helpful, Minnesota's Department of Education will need to develop the capacity for monitoring districts' and charters' staff development choices at this level of detail.¹³

Possible Approach: This could be addressed by a partnership between Minnesota's Department of Education, district professional development coordinators and multilingual staff, and teacher preparation programs to build a staff development curriculum for ELs. This curriculum should address both pre-service and in-service experiences and the links between them. The curriculum could be disseminated through the Minnesota Department of Education's Regional Centers of Excellence and through the Minnesota Center for Professional Development. All districts and charters could require all staff to participate in several core trainings covering ELs' language development. They could then be allowed to choose additional elective staff development courses from a list, according to what the data suggest are each school's particular needs. However, in order to have impact, these professional development offerings must be high quality, ongoing, and offer job-embedded opportunities for learning and practice.

13 H.F. 2397, Section 6, Subdivision 4.

Next Steps, Professional Development:

Action	Responsible	Together with:	Description
MDE convening	MDE	Teacher preparation programs + district professional development coordinators and multi-lingual staff + Regional Centers of Excellence	MDE convenes a daylong meeting of Minnesota teacher preparation programs that are leading the way in preparing all their teaching candidates to support ELs, along with groups dedicated to educational equity, to discuss a possible partnership compact.
Align IHEs assessments with EL standards	Minnesota Board of Teaching	Chairs of Senate & House Education	Verify that all EL teaching expectations are included as critical data in the assessment process used to approve teacher preparation programs.
Underscore to Board of Teaching that this is a priority	Chairs of Senate & House Education Committees	Other legislators	Consistently follow up with Board of Teaching to stay abreast of progress. Underscore that this is of vital importance.
Steady and persistent communication with all policymakers, including Board of Teaching, to support implementation.	Philanthropic and nonprofit community	Supportive policymakers	Inform policymakers and disseminate information to stakeholders by tracking and communicating implementation progress, attending hearings and meetings, asking questions, writing letters, and authoring opinion pieces.

Issue C: Ensuring effective teacher and administrator preparation and evaluation to support ELs

The law requires all candidates for teacher licensure “to be prepared in English language development and content instruction for English learners.”¹⁴ It further requires that future administrators be prepared to support ELs in their native languages and in English.¹⁵ Implemented carefully, this has the potential to dramatically improve the caliber of Minnesota’s teaching force.

Unfortunately, without clear, specific guidelines regarding effective teacher preparation for serving ELs, the efficacy of this provision will vary along with each preparation program’s view of what constitutes adequate attention to ELs’ needs. This is a common problem. When a 2008 Illinois law expanded the number of teachers who would be required to have a bilingual or English

as a Second Language credential, preparation programs did not immediately rise to meet the need on their own. Some programs, like DePaul University, started requiring coursework relevant to ELs for all teacher candidates, but most programs did not respond.¹⁶

Possible Approach: This might be partially addressed by making the law more explicit. The state could incorporate specific knowledge about ELs into its expectations for teacher candidates by evaluating all teacher candidates against the rubrics included in EdTPA’s “English as an Additional Language” performance task. This would encourage all preparation programs to instruct their candidates to teach that knowledge. This could be immediately addressed by a partnership between Minnesota’s Department of Education and teacher preparation programs to build and implement an evidence-based pre-service teacher and administrator curriculum for ELs. This effort could result in clear guidelines regarding the characteristics of effective teacher preparation and administrator preparation.

14 H.F. 2397, Section 12.

15 H.F. 2397, Section 13.

16 Maggie Severns, *Starting Early with English Language Learners: First Lessons from Illinois* (Washington, DC: New America, 2012), http://newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/Starting_Early_With_English_Language_Learners.pdf; DePaul University, “University Catalog, Major Requirements,” <http://www.depaul.edu/university-catalog/degree-requirements/undergraduate/education/early-childhood-education-bs/Pages/major-requirements.aspx>, (Accessed 06-18-2014); Rebecca Harris, “Bilingual Teachers in Short Supply,” Catalyst Chicago, June 17, 2013, <http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/news/2013/06/17/21193/bilingual-teachers-in-short-supply-pre-schools>; Rebecca Harris, “Suburban Chicago Schools Lag as Bilingual Needs Grow,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/10/education/suburban-chicago-schools-lag-as-bilingual-needs-grow.html?pagewanted=all>.

Next Steps, Teacher/Administrator Preparation:

Action	Responsible	Together with:	Description
Clarify expectations regarding preparation	MN Legislature	Chairs of Senate & House Education Committees would lead	Introduce and pass legislation that incorporates into LEAPS the specific EL expectations of teachers from EdTPA's "English as an Additional Language" performance task.
Create a widely accessible summary of EdTPA's "English as an Additional Language" task	MDE		Provide physical and electronic copies to members of the legislature and the public.
EL curriculum development partnership	MDE	Teacher preparation programs	Jointly develop and implement an evidence-based pre-service teacher and administrator curriculum for ELs.
Develop EL licensure standards for non-ESL licensed teachers	Board of Teaching	Teacher preparation programs Research community Community representatives	Evaluate best practices in EL instruction at the early childhood, intermediate and secondary levels. Recommend and adopt standards of effective practice to be incorporated into general education licensure programs.
Include effective instructional supports for ELs in teacher evaluation systems where applicable	Legislature	MDE Districts	Amend the state's teacher evaluation law to require that all evaluation instruments include measures of effectiveness for supporting EL students. Require that districts evaluate teachers and principals against these measures whenever their classrooms/schools contain a significant number of EL students.

Additional Steps to Faithful Implementation of the LEAPS Act

In addition to the three primary implementation needs discussed above, stakeholders stressed that additional actions will be required at each level of the school system if we are to ensure effective implementation. Their suggestions are outlined below. We have organized them in three categories: policy and governance issues, administrative actions, and point of service.

As emphasized earlier in this paper, all stakeholders noted that **culturally relevant practices and approaches must be embedded across these actions.**

State Government	
<i>Policy & Governance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide additional funding to MDE to support implementation and oversight (The EL department of MDE currently has only three full-time employees who are already tasked with providing other support to districts). • The Board of Teaching must define specific EL teaching skills all teachers must demonstrate for licensure and should write a rule explaining how teacher preparation programs will be evaluated.
<i>Administrative Action</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a review and approval process for EL components of all districts' and charters' World's Best Workforce and local literacy plans. Clearly define EL-related outcomes expected of districts and charters. • Identify districts and charters that will serve as pilots for full and faithful implementation of LEAPS. These districts should receive especially robust supports from MDE and community partners. • Develop an "implementation toolkit" for electronic distribution to all Minnesota districts and charter schools. • Modeled on MDE's PreK-3rd wiki site, create a resource hub through which districts, charters and teachers all over the state can share and search for promising practices and lessons learned. • Develop and deliver trainings on WIDA EL standards to districts and charters. • Include supports for ELs in Minnesota's early childhood quality rating and improvement system, Parent Aware for School Readiness. • Develop a rating or assessment system to identify teacher education programs that are implementing EL standards with high quality. • Inform and support groups — such as the MDE advisory group, Board of School Administrators, Board of Teaching, superintendents, universities and Regional Centers of Excellence — to become champions.
<i>Point of Service</i>	Identify (and act upon) opportunities to embed the focus on EL students across all MDE departments.

Districts and Charter Schools	
<i>Policy & Governance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set policies to improve professional development experiences that specifically support teaching ELs. (Examples: all teachers can access specific coaching around EL; including opportunities to practice during professional development hours.) • Develop placement policies that incent effective, bilingual teachers and leaders to work in schools where they can facilitate native language development (i.e. an effective teacher who speaks Somali is placed in a school with a large Somali population.) • Develop policy directives around family translators.
<i>Administrative Action</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superintendent/Executive Director emphasizes EL as district/charter priority through words and practice. • Use Q Comp funding to support implementation of EL practices. • Provide EL professional development that emphasizes coaching and practice. • Leverage certified EL instructors as teacher leaders and coaches who can support general education teachers in developing instructional skills for supporting ELs. • Establish coherent guidelines for instructing and assessing ELs to ensure consistency across classrooms and grade levels. • Provide culturally specific parent academies that focus on helping parents understand how to support literacy development in both English and their home languages. • Provide culturally specific advocacy training to multilingual parents. • Promote regular communication with parents regarding student language development. Build time for this communication into the teacher workday.
<i>Point of Service</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide greater induction support and coaching for new teachers at each school, especially teachers of color, American Indians, and native speakers of other languages. • Ensure that all parents can readily access translation services and culturally relevant programming and materials that provide updates about their children’s linguistic and academic progress.

Higher Education Teacher Training Programs

- Align teacher training programs with LEAPS requirements.
- Work with districts and charters to create professional development experiences that specifically support teaching ELs.

Classroom Teachers

- Work with union representatives and/or administrative teams to secure professional development opportunities that are more relevant to teachers: provided by experts and with opportunities to observe practice, implement new strategies, and receive feedback during professional development hours.
- Work with union representatives and/or administrative teams to secure EL coaches who can support teachers in their practice.
- Identify technology, curricular resources, and/or assessments that could help their work in teaching ELs and engaging multilingual families. Work with union representatives and/or administrative teams to secure any identified resources.

Laying the Ground Work

Although the onus for implementation falls primarily on schools and districts, teacher preparation programs, and state government, there is an important role for community organizations, grantmakers, and grassroots actors to play in order to build a sense of urgency about effective and faithful implementation. Three key opportunities were identified: 1) creating a third party to monitor implementation, 2) engaging families and the community, and 3) launching a communications and/or advocacy campaign.

Third party to monitor quality and fidelity of implementation. A coalition of organizations committed to faithful implementation should come together to create a structure and process for disseminating information and leveraging the coalition to influence implementation. Included in this group would be organizations that focus specifically on education equity, such as the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership and League of Latino Educators. Activities could include:

- Providing informational updates about progress on any of the implementation steps
- Issuing calls to action when opportunities arise to influence implementation
- Organizing members to attend key hearings, board meetings, and other public events
- Authoring opinion pieces, blog articles, and other articles to influence public opinion
- Organizing social media blitzes, Tweet-ups, etc.

Family and community engagement. Parent and families will play an important role in communicating their expectation that schools and districts take full advantage of the opportunity provided by LEAPS. They should be engaged in this work from the earliest stages. Community organizations and advocates can inform families of the resources available to adults through this legislation and also support families in advocating for the new rights granted to their children. Both will help parents become their children's first and biggest champions.

Communications and advocacy campaign. A strategic communications and/or advocacy campaign could build a groundswell of support for the components of LEAPS with the public. This might include working with families and communities to develop a public narrative about the opportunity and promise of English Learners, paid and/or earned media, advocacy efforts to influence both policy and implementation, and a host of other possibilities.

Outstanding Questions & Issues to Consider

As we set out to develop clear next steps to realize the goals of LEAPS, we also identified a number of outstanding questions, the answers to which will influence final implementation of this new legislation. They include:

Who decides what types of professional development teachers receive? While professional development is specifically called out in the bill — and all involved in the conversation convened at the McKnight Foundation agreed that it is an important area of opportunity in order to better

support ELs — there are widely varying opinions about who should determine the specific professional development that teachers receive. Is it the district? Leaders at the individual school? The teacher herself? This question will be at the center of implementation steps related to LEAPS’ professional development requirements.

How will we know if any of these changes are improving outcomes for ELs? Since most of our system is still input-based (i.e. curriculum standards for teacher preparation accreditation, professional development requirements) rather than outcomes-based, how will we collectively hold ourselves accountable for improving educational outcomes for EL students? What, specifically, do we expect will change?

What is the Minnesota Department of Education’s responsibility and capacity to enforce this legislation? Much of this legislation relies on the Minnesota Department of Education taking action to enforce it. However, the EL department’s three-person staff is already stretched thin monitoring compliance with federal and state mandates for ELs, and the demands made by this legislation will be a significant addition to their workload. How will MDE either secure additional resources to fund more staff positions or get creative in developing partnerships with organizations that can help carry out the work?

Seizing the Opportunity

Minnesota’s new EL reforms are an exciting step forward. In the Midwest, a region where PreK–12 education, global workforce development, the ability to attract and retain talent, and states’ long-term fiscal outlooks are inextricably linked, it is critical that policymakers invest in ELs’ linguistic and cultural strengths. Despite the implementation issues listed above, these new policies make it clear that Minnesota is preparing to do precisely that. We hope that this articulation of a set of specific, first steps will smooth the road we must all travel together.

About the McKnight Foundation

This publication was commissioned by The McKnight Foundation as part of the “Food for Thought” series — a collection of third-party reports that inform our program strategies and are shared with the fields we support. This publication is available for download at www.mcknight.org.

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