EDUDREAM

Champions of Educational Equity

DID STANDARDS-BASED REFORM ADDRESS STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES IN EDUCATION?

RQ¹

STANDARDS-BASED REFORM
EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS

CONTENTS

ABOUT EDUDREAM

Established in 2016 and based in Chicago, EduDream is a Latina-owned education consulting firm that partners with foundations, education agencies, and nonprofits working to ensure educational equity for racially and economically diverse students. We advance our mission by providing research and program evaluation, data analytics and insights, and strategic planning. EduDream is committed to empowering communities and making research and data accessible.

OVERVIEW

The Standards-Based Reform (SBR) movement has shaped current debates in the United States about public education, educators' practices, and student outcomes. Past research on SBR assessed what worked well and lessons learned over time. This evidence synthesis is the first in a three-part series that builds upon previous research by examining SBR successes and challenges, evaluating progress in addressing educational inequities, and outlining bright spots. The series explores three research questions, and this synthesis addresses the first research question.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS (RQs)

RQ¹ DID SBR ADDRESS STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES IN EDUCATION?
How did standards-based assessment and accountability reform address structural inequities in the education system? What were the successes and challenges?

RQ² WHAT WERE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF SBR, PARTICULARLY ON STUDENTS OF COLOR?
What were some of the unintended consequences (i.e., negative impact) of standards-based assessment and accountability on schools and districts serving primarily Black, Latinx, and low-income students? What pushback, if any, did standards-based assessment and accountability receive, and from whom?

RQ³ WHAT EQUITABLE APPROACHES, IF ANY, HAVE BEEN TAKEN TO ADDRESS THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF SBR?
Of districts previously identified as low-performing or turnaround but are now demonstrating positive academic shifts for target students (Black, Latinx, and low-income), what actions were taken to address the unintended consequences of SBR? Were equitable strategies and approaches used to address unintended consequences of SBR? If so, what are the emerging results?

APPROACH

In the Fall of 2020, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation partnered with EduDream to better understand the Standards-Based Reform movement and its impact on United States education. Together, we established search criteria and parameters to guide the literature search. EduDream conducted three rounds of evidence gathering for this synthesis.

After an initial review and analysis to identify emerging findings and assess how well the sources addressed the research question, we conducted a second and third round of literature searches to fill in gaps. Please contact EduDream if you'd like to learn more.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Numerous terms consistently emerge in the literature. To guide our search, we developed working definitions for the most critical words and phrases.

Academic Standards. Academic standards (also called "content standards") define the knowledge and skills that students are expected to master at specified grade levels in their education.

Accountability Pressure. The pressure to raise student test scores in order to remove the label of "failing" and avoid NCLB sanctions (i.e., school restructuring, turnaround or closing.

Accountability System. "An accountability system is the set of policies and practices used to measure and hold schools and districts responsible for raising student achievement for all students, and to prompt and support improvement where necessary (EdTrust, 2019)." Traditional accountability systems tend to include two key measures: student performance on statewide standardized assessments and high school graduation rates. Under ESSA, accountability systems also include 9th grade on-track (for high school graduation), chronic absenteeism, SEL or college and career readiness measures.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Although mentioned in the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) became synonymous with No Child Left Behind (NCLB). AYP measures states, districts and schools' yearly improvement and progress toward teaching all students what they need to know (i.e., 100 percent proficiency).[1] In order to make AYP, all subgroups must demonstrate progress and meet state benchmarks.

Closing the Achievement Gaps. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), "achievement gaps occur when one group of students (e.g., students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender) outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant (i.e., larger than the margin of error)." References to the achievement gaps tend to imply the difference in standardized test performance of one racial or ethnic group of students to that of White students. It is common to see references to the Black-White or Hispanic-White achievement gap. NCLB's use of disaggregated data illuminated the achievement gaps within and across schools for low-income and students of color.[2]

Drivers. District factors or efforts that affect students' learning experiences, opportunities and outcomes such as interpersonal relationships, course offerings and rigor, teacher diversity, and non-exclusionary disciplinary practices. Drivers can include policies, practices, programs or systems to address and support students' social emotional needs, basic needs and ensure equitable policies and practices.

Educational Equity. The moral and civil rights obligation to ensure that students receive the support and resources they need to succeed, regardless of background, race, color, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, place of origin, native language, socioeconomic status, or any other discriminating factor. Success hinges on access to a school environment equipped for safe and stimulating learning opportunities. Resources for social and emotional growth and excellent educators who can keep students on track to graduate from high school ready for college or careers are also necessary.

Equitable Accountability Approaches. Equitable accountability approaches take into consideration processes and systems created to ensure access to educational opportunities, responsiveness to student and community needs, data transparency, climate and culture, and student success. Equitable accountability approaches could include quantitative as well as qualitative measures, and seek to get at the root cause of inequities by asking how much are we doing (e.g., equitable funding), how well are we doing it, and who is better off as a result? Potential approaches include: disaggregated data reporting; expansive use of measures (college readiness, SEL, early childhood, etc.); equity indicators or measures, if any; and systems of support for school improvement

Intentional Equity Work. Evidence of district's awareness or acknowledgement of racial disparities, plan to address disparities, and/or actively working to address disparities by changing practices, policies and access to opportunities and supports. Equity work is publicly available and evident in the last five years from 2015-2020 (Oliva and Martinez, 2021).

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[1] **U.S. Departement of Education, Guidance on Standards, Assessments, and Accountability**

[2] **National Center for Education Statistics (NCES); and EduDream**

No Child Left Behind (NLCB) Subgroups. A subgroup is a subset of students within a school, district or state education system that can be grouped together based on social markers such as socioeconomic status (economically disadvantaged determined by free and reduced-price lunch status), race/ethnicity, and distinct learning needs (e.g., Students with Disabilities, English Language Learners). Under NCLB, AYP must be reported for all students and disaggregated by subgroups.

Performance Standards. Performance standards (or "achievement standards," as they are called in NCLB) indicate the level of attainment expected with respect to the academic standards. Performance standards are usually established through a process that identifies one or more cut scores on a standardized test that indicates whether a student has attained a specific level of performance, such as "basic" or "proficient." (Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2006).

Positive Shifts, also referred to as *positive outliers*, or *beating the odds*. Districts exhibiting positive shifts are those that "excel at supporting the learning of students of color and students from low-income families. In these districts, students of color, as well as White students, consistently achieve at higher than expected levels, outperforming students of similar racial/ethnic backgrounds from families of similar income and education levels in most other districts in the state."[3] This does not necessarily mean the achievement gap has been closed.

Standards-Based Accountability. Standards-based accountability (SBA) is an approach to measuring and incentivizing school performance by attaching consequences to student achievement test scores. Educators and policymakers have used other terms, including "systemic reform," "standards-based reform," and "curriculum alignment," to describe similar ideas that differ somewhat in emphasis or evolution. SBA typically includes standards that indicate what students are expected to know and be able to do, measures of student attainment of the standards, targets for performance on those measures, and a set of consequences for schools or educations based on performance (Hamilton et al., 2012).

Standards-Based Assessment. Large-scale tests developed and aligned to standards that measure student academic outcomes or achievement.

Standards-Based Reform. Although there is no universally accepted definition of standards-based reform (SBR), most discussions include some or all of the following features: **(1)** academic expectations for students (the standards are often described as indicating "what students should know and be able to do"); **(2)** alignment of critical elements of the educational system to promote attainment of these expectations; **(3)** use of student achievement assessments to monitor performance; **(4)** decentralization of responsibility for decisions relating to curriculum and instruction to schools; **(5)** support and technical assistance to foster the improvement of educational services; and **(6)** accountability provisions that reward or sanction schools or students based on measured performance (Hamilton et al., 2008).

Structural Inequity. Sociologists have defined structural inequity (or "structural inequality") as "an inequality in the distribution of a valued resource, such as wealth, information or education, that brings social power." Structural inequality delivers cumulative advantage to some groups of people, and cumulative disadvantage to others, by disparately allocating access to education, employment, housing, food, healthcare, and political power. (Royce 2019).

Systemic Reform. A broad-based approach that embodies three components: **(1)** standards for what students are expected to learn; **(2)** the alignment of other components of the education system, such as assessment and teacher training, to these standards; and **(3)** a restructured governance approach to support improved student achievement (Smith and O'Day, 1991).

Unintended Consequences. In the social sciences, unintended consequences (sometimes referred to as "unanticipated consequences" or "unforeseen consequences") are outcomes of a purposeful action that are not intended or foreseen. The term was popularized in the twentieth century by American sociologist Robert K. Merton.

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[3] **Learning Policy Institute, California's Positive Outliers: Districts Beating the Odds and REL Beating the Odds Reports (FL and MS)**

BACKGROUND

While Standards-Based Reform efforts trace back to the 1960s and 1970s, the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education) is viewed as a seminal report that spurred policy debates on raising student academic expectations, teacher performance, and systematic monitoring of student achievement (Wixson, Dutro, and Athan, 2003).

> **Today, almost 40 years later, there are mixed perspectives on the intent of *A Nation at Risk*.**

Was it sounding an alarm because the federal government genuinely cared about public education and educating America's poorest students? Was the state of education becoming a national security concern? Or was the report's staunch language meant to serve as evidence to support a growing conservative movement towards school vouchers, school prayer, and the elimination of the Department of Education?

Regardless of its motive, the federal government became increasingly invested in ensuring students receive a world-class education to remain a competitive nation.

1980 - 1990s

The 1981 Education Consolidation and Improvement Act reduced Title I's federal regulations and shifted resource allocation decisions to states. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, states and districts (e.g., California, Texas, and Kentucky) led efforts to improve standards and measure progress. Unfortunately, these efforts were largely incoherent, as states could not clearly articulate a common understanding of teaching and learning expectations (Massell, 1994).

In 1991, Smith and O'Day introduced the concept of "systemic reform" that encapsulated SBR as a call for student learning standards and alignment of other components of the education system like teacher preparation, assessment, and district and state support.

During this time, there were also early efforts to develop new assessments (e.g., the New Standards Project) and experimentation with performance-based assessments and rubrics.

The 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) called Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) focused on:

1. High standards for all students;
2. Teachers better trained for teaching to high standards;
3. Flexibility to stimulate local reform, coupled with accountability for results; and
4. Close partnerships among families, communities, and schools.[4]

IASA was informed by research, reports, educational plans, and bills that emerged from working groups such as the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) and the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCREST).

2000s

By the early 2000s, almost every state had adopted standards and assessments, though not all used these systems for accountability purposes. This frame of standards and accountability, and a bipartisan commitment to more equitable education, resulted in the reauthorization of ESEA as the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001.

NCLB was a shift towards increased accountability and assessment by codifying accountability standards for all schools and requiring that all students perform at academic proficiency levels by 2014. States were responsible for establishing academic standards, assessments, annual performance targets, and reporting performance by student groups. Schools that failed to meet their performance targets (called Adequate Yearly Progress or AYP) faced severe sanctions, including possible reconstitution and takeover.

> **The increased enforcement of accountability had motivating and negative influences on teaching and testing. In fact, SBR became somewhat synonymous with "test-based reform," a system in which educators and others rely primarily on the test rather than the standards to communicate expectations and inform practice.**

In 2009, Congress provided competitive grants to states through its Race to the Top (RTT) grant program. RTT incentivized states to enact reforms in four areas:

1. Enhancing standards and assessments;
2. Improving collection and use of data;
3. Increasing teacher effectiveness and achieving equity in teacher distribution; and
4. Turning around low-achieving schools.

Most notably, RTT incentivized states to implement common academic standards, referred to as the Common Core State Standards.

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[4] **The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994**

2010s

Starting in 2012, the federal government began issuing NCLB waivers to give states flexibility for some of the law's requirements, such as the 2014 deadline for states to ensure 100 percent of students are reading and doing math at grade level, and requiring teachers in core subjects to be deemed *highly qualified.*[5]

The reauthorization of ESEA in December 2015 marked a turning point in the federal government's role in education policy. The Every Student Succeeds Acts (ESSA) gave states and districts autonomy to revise accountability, assessment, and educator evaluation policies. Rather than focusing only on test score gains, states are now encouraged to choose additional measures of school quality and student success such as:

- ▶ **Chronic absenteeism**
- ▶ **Measures of college and career readiness (e.g., access and success in AP, IB, CTE, or dual enrollment)**
- ▶ **9th grade on-track for high school graduation**
- ▶ **School climate**

ESSA gives states greater autonomy in determining their school rating scale (e.g., 1-5, A-F, etc.) and how they calculate those ratings. For example, 17 states' school ratings continue to reflect student subgroup performance, whereas 12 states do not include student subgroups in school ratings. The majority of states are using summative averages across all students or only including some subgroups, and this approach masks subgroup performance.[6]

ESSA is still in its early stages of implementation, as most states submitted finalized plans in 2017 and transitioned to ESSA accountability systems in 2018.

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[5] **In 2001, NCLB included the Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) provision, which required teachers to meet three criteria: (1) At least a bachelor's degree; (2) Full state certification; and (3) Demonstrated competence in each core academic subject taught**

[6] **All for Ed, Too Many States Minimize Student Subgroup Performance in ESSA Accountability Systems**

SUMMARY OF STANDARDS-BASED REFORM POLICY & NATIONAL DEBATE

1980 - 1990s
Period of State-led Reforms

In the early and mid-90's, states led educational reforms by defining teaching and learning standards. States also began to experiment with their own assessments in this time.

1983
A Nation at Risk

Published and becomes the seminal report that spurred policy debates on the outlook of the United States' educational system

1991
Systemic Reform Concept Introduced

Smith and O'Day introduce the concept of "systemic reform" that encapsulated SBR as a call for student learning standards and alignment of other components of the education system

1994
Improving America's Schools Act (IASA)

The 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) called Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) marks a shift from state-led efforts to federal policy intervention around SBR

2000s
Period of Federaly-led Policy Reforms

By this time almost all states had adopted some form of reform standards. Federally led policies created mandates to tie reform practices to school and district accountability.

2001
No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act

This policy created a shift towards increased accountability and assessment by codifying accountability standards for all schools and requiring that all students perform at academic proficiency levels by 2014

2009
Race to the Top (RTT) Grants

Congress provides competitive grant support to states as an incentive to enact reforms

2010s
Rebalancing of State and Federal Roles

Most efforts in this era were designed to re-balance state autonomy with federal oversight.

2012
NCLB Waivers

These federally issued waivers gave states flexiblity in meeting some of the NCLB requirements

2015
Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Marks a turning point in the federal government's role in SBR. States and districts are given more autonomy to to revise accountability, assessment, and educator evaluation policies. They are also now able to include additional measurements in their standards
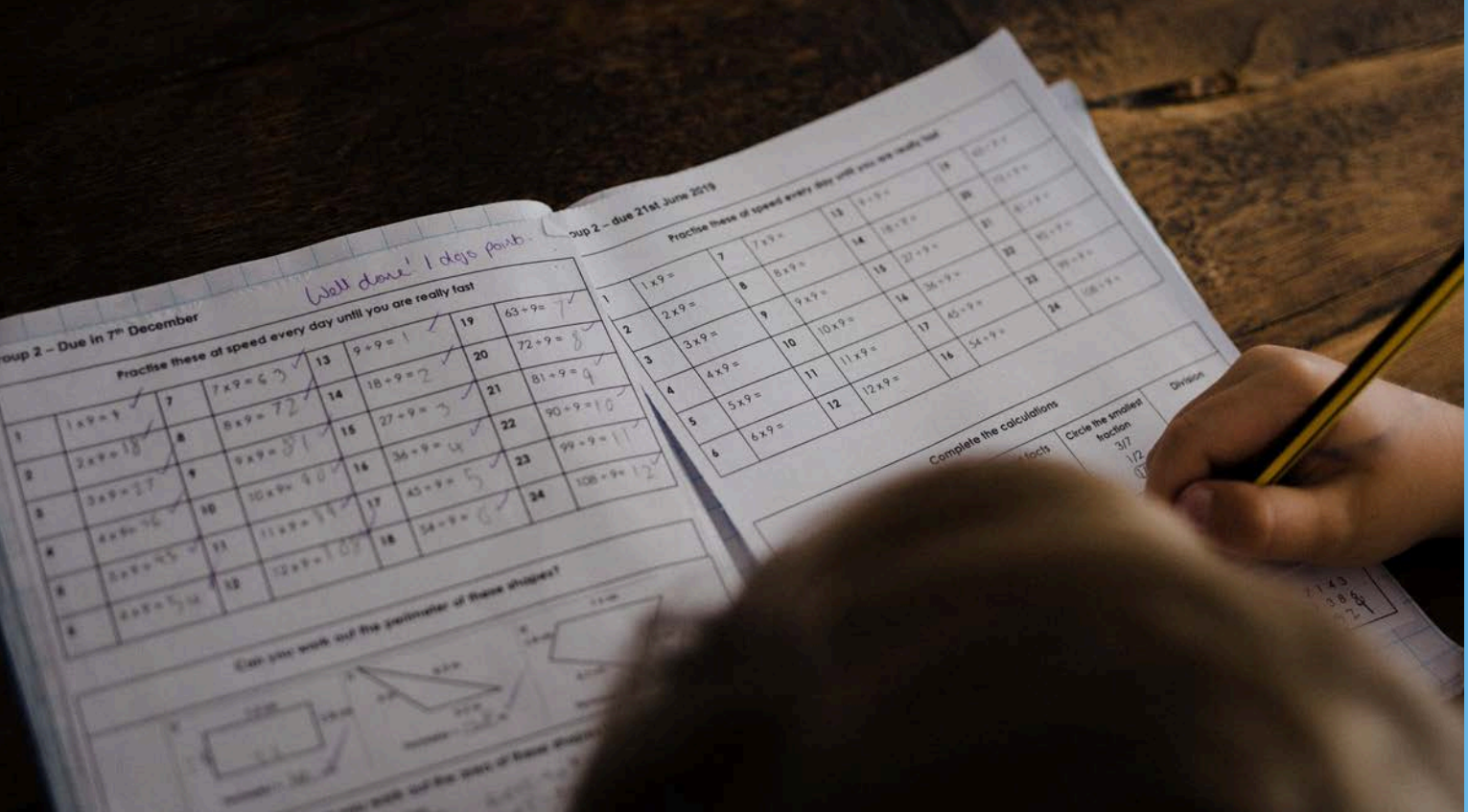
RQ¹ EVIDENCE BASE

HOW AND IN WHAT WAYS

DID STANDARDS-BASED REFORM ADDRESS STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES IN EDUCATION?

Standards-based reform (SBR) presents various potential solutions to ensure students have equal access to education, which is the premise of ESEA. Understanding the successes and challenges of SBR and the extent to which SBR has addressed structural inequities in the education system are critical for those seeking to engage or inform the direction of SBR. This section presents the evidence-base for each finding that addresses RQ1.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

STANDARDS AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE ON STANDARDIZED TESTS

01 Federal SBR policies played a role in moving states toward more rigorous standards. Evidence points to a correlation between states' adoption of standards and increased student performance on standardized tests.

02 Studies show that standards-based reform has contributed to improved student achievement since the 1990s. However, there is variability in student achievement by subject and school level as well as across states.

03 There is no consistent evidence on whether SBR contributes to narrowing achievement gaps among racial and ethnic student populations.

STANDARDS-BASED REFORM IMPACT ON NON-TEST METRICS

04 Research suggests that accountability systems had a mixed impact on non-test metrics.

STANDARDS-BASED REFORM AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

05 While SBR motivated districts and schools to implement school improvement strategies, states faced severe challenges due to inadequate funding and technical capacity limitations.

STANDARDS-BASED REFORM AND STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES

06 SBR attempted to remedy inequities by shifting the focus to instruction and student outcomes. However, these attempts were not centered on addressing racial and socioeconomic academic disparities.

07 While NCLB addressed academic disparities, it did not achieve its goal of racial and socioeconomic equity.

08 Although ESSA, as written, has the potential to advance educational equity and eliminate structural inequities, some states and ED are retreating from equity.

STANDARDS AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE ON STANDARDIZED TESTS

01 Federal SBR policies played a role in moving states toward more rigorous standards. Evidence points to a correlation between states' adoption of standards and increased student performance on standardized tests.

▶ From 1994 to 2013, SBR began to address educational inequality by accelerating the development and adoption of more rigorous academic standards to drive improved outcomes (Hamilton, 2012).

▶ A review by Lauer et al. (2005) finds that standards-based curricula and standards-aligned instructional practices are both associated with positive student achievement outcomes.

Boser and Brown (2016) used three categories to generate a standards-based reform score for each state: standards; assessments; and accountability similar to Swanson, 2006. The regression analysis finds that from 2003 to 2015, in states with more robust standards-based reform (e.g., District of Columbia, Tennessee, Massachusetts), low-income students demonstrated larger gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The researchers attribute positive outcomes in elementary school math and middle school reading to states' SBR efforts. The states with the smallest gains (e.g., Kansas, Iowa, Idaho, Montana,and North and South Dakota) were those that had left or were looking to leave the Common Core State Standards.[7]

▶ A recent SBR analysis asserts that federal policy initiatives such as Race to the Top (RTT) encouraged states to adopt college and career-ready standards such as CSSS, which brought greater consistency among states' standards, and a near-universal shift to clearer, more rigorous learning standards in reading and math (Spurrier et al., 2020). Forty-five states agreed to adopt CCSS in 2010, and most states have retained key elements in updated standards.

EQUITY CHALLENGES

▶ There is no consensus on criteria to evaluate state academic standards (Hamilton et al., 2008). One state's academic standards can be considered rigorous by one set of criteria and low by another. If the goal is rigorous standards for all students, particularly low-income, Black and Latinx students, there needs to be agreement on what this looks like. Further, **a focus on rigor alone will not lead to equitable outcomes;** equity-focused standards can make more explicit links between standards and equitable practices and resources.

▶ Evaluations of state academic standards continue to recommend more rigorous or coherent standards (Hamilton et al., 2008). As a result, student performance on some states' standardized assessments may reflect score inflation. One study analyzed test items in state assessments and NAEP and found plausible "score inflation" because state tests were focused more on basic skills and lower difficulty levels than NAEP (Jacob, 2007). For low-income, Black and Latinx students in such states, low academic standards can have equity implications such as reducing access to rigorous instruction and curriculum.

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[7] The Boser and Brown (2016) study did not examine the intersection of income and race.

02 Studies show that standards-based reform has contributed to improved student achievement since the 1990s. However, there is variability in student achievement by subject and school level as well as across states.

▶ Various studies identify a positive relationship between accountability policies and student achievement (e.g., Carnoy and Loeb, 2002; Jacob, 2005; Hanushek and Raymond, 2005).

▶ Hanushek and Raymond (2005) found a positive relationship between implementing accountability policy and student achievement gains from 1992 to 2002 across 42 states.

▶ Studies in states such as Texas, North Carolina, Connecticut, and Arkansas have found student achievement gains on both state assessments and NAEP (Jacob, 2007).

▶ During the NCLB era, student achievement gains in mathematics were greater than gains in reading. Similarly, student achievement gains were more evident in elementary and middle school grades than at the high school level (Spurrier et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2008; Jacob, 2007).

▶ Rosenshine (2003) found that average NAEP increases were greater in states with high-stakes testing policies than states without. However, among the states with strong accountability policies, student outcomes on NAEP varied. Rosenshine concluded that *"although attaching accountability to statewide tests worked well in some high-stakes states, it was not an effective policy in all states."*
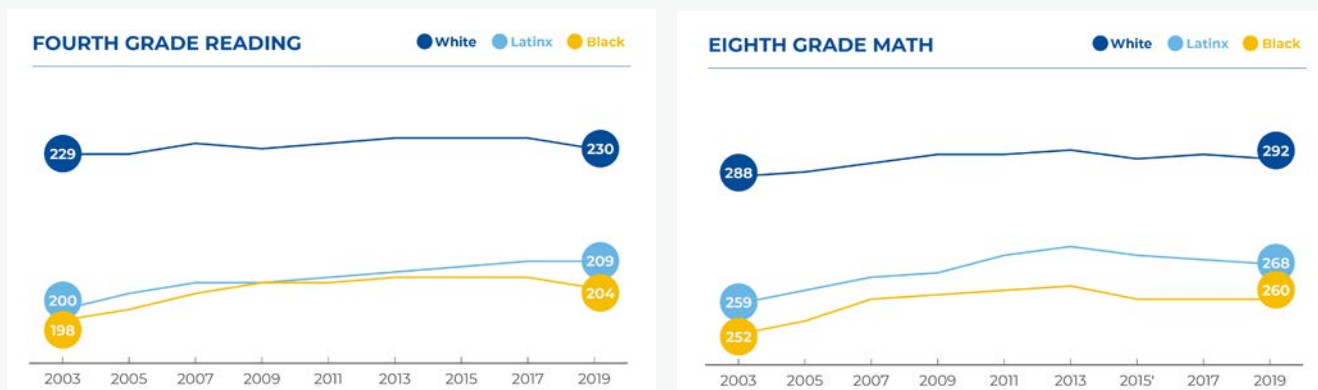
EQUITY CHALLENGES

▶ **Aligning curriculum to standards remains a challenge.** Surveys by the RAND Corporation found that most teachers are not using a standards-aligned curriculum, but instead rely on materials created by their districts, schools, or themselves (Kaufman et al., 2020).

▶ Despite systemic efforts to raise academic expectations for all students, **many students-particularly, low-income students and students of color-still do not have equitable access to rigorous instruction.** An analysis from TNTP found that low-income students and students of color still have less access to high-quality, rigorous curriculum and instruction (TNTP, 2018).

03

There is no consistent evidence on whether SBR contributes to narrowing achievement gaps among racial and ethnic student populations.

▶ A 2012 analysis of NAEP data (1990-2009) finds that racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps remained the same or slowed down from pre-NCLB to NCLB (Lee and Reeves, 2012). Moreover, post-NCLB, there were no changes found in either the status or growth rate of the Black-White reading achievement gap in Grades 4 and 8, or the Hispanic-White reading gap. The authors concluded that "NCLB had not yet evidenced sustainable and generalizable high-stakes accountability policy effects."

▶ In Texas, the racial achievement gaps averaged 30 points in 1994 (Peabody, 2003). Although racial achievement gaps were closing on the state's assessment (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills), the gaps remained and even widened on the updated and more challenging state assessment (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, first administered in 2002). Among high school students, the achievement gaps between White and Black, and White and Latino students were nearly 40 points in math (Neill et al., 2004).

▶ Although highly contested among researchers, there is evidence that some states may have excluded large numbers of students from NAEP testing (Nichols et al., 2006). Amrein-Beardsley and Berliner's 2003 trend analysis of NAEP included exclusion rates (i.e., students excluded from assessments). It found that while states with strong accountability policies outperform states without on the fourth-grade math NAEP exams, this difference disappears when controlling for NAEP exclusion rates.

NCLB had not yet evidenced sustainable and generalizable high-stakes accountability policy effects.

DOCUMENTING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP | 2003-2019

FOURTH GRADE READING — ● White ● Latinx ● Black

229 ——— 230
200 ——— 209
198 ——— 204

2003 2005 2007 2009 2011 2013 2015 2017 2019

EIGHTH GRADE MATH — ● White ● Latinx ● Black

288 ——— 292
259 ——— 268
252 ——— 260

2003 2005 2007 2009 2011 2013 2015' 2017 2019

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

EQUITY CHALLENGES

▶ During the NCLB era, SBR became synonymous with test-based reform. As a result, it was the test, not the standards, driving curriculum, instruction, and teacher practices (Hamilton et al., 2008). Test-based reform was most evident in schools failing to make AYP, which tended to serve high-poverty and students of color.

▶ According to the 2015 EdNext poll, about two-thirds of K–12 parents supported annual testing requirements. Yet, a vocal few wanted the ability to have their children "opt-out" of such tests. Separate studies indicate that most of these parents were White (Bryant, 2016; Schweig, 2016). Policymakers have been responsive to opt-out demands by reducing the number of testing days (e.g., New York) and adding explicit language in ESSA regarding parents' rights to refuse testing.

▶ There is growing support for opt-out from communities of color. It is essential for policymakers and education leaders to understand the rationale, concerns, and aversion to standardized tests may differ for different parents. The use of standardized tests has a long and racist history in America.

▶ Teachers themselves are divided on the issue of high-stakes testing.

▶ SBR requires reduced variability in student performance. There is no evidence that such a reduction has ever been achieved in any education system. For example, NCLB required the inclusion of students with disabilities (SWD) in state assessment participation; yet, there is tension between test inclusion and the achievement and graduation targets for SWD. It should be noted that while SWD made gains on NAEP from 2000 to 2013 (e.g., 19 points in Math), and the percentage of Black and Latinx SWD graduating high school increased from 36.5 and 47.5 percentage points in 2001 to 52 and 55 percent in 2011, the overall number of SWD increased significantly. In particular, the number of Black and Latinx identified for special education burgeoned.

▶ Standardized tests are not viewed as valuable or useful in informing instructional practices by teachers.

STANDARDS-BASED REFORM IMPACT ON NON-TEST METRICS

## 04 Research suggests that accountability systems had a mixed impact on non-test metrics.

SBR, especially in the NCLB era, relied on one key lagging indicator: standardized assessment scores. Yet, growing evidence points to leading indicators that can predict student learning outcomes. Non-test metrics, such as attendance, suspension or disciplinary rates, and high school graduation rates, are a few examples of leading indicators.

▶ Holbein and Ladd (2015) used administrative data from North Carolina to examine how failure to make adequate yearly progress under NCLB impacted non-test-based measures. The researchers observed a reduction in student absences and tardies. They infer that accountability pressure encouraged students to show up at elementary and middle schools. It is likely that attendance expectations were communicated to families; hence, placing pressure on them to ensure K-8 students were showing up to school. The study did not observe the same positive impacts at the high school level.

▶ Dee and Jacob (2010) found that NCLB led to distinct improvements in a teacher-reported index of non-test-based measures including attendance, timeliness, and intellectual interest.

▶ Evidence also suggests SBR has a positive impact on high school graduation rates. For example, a recent Brookings Institute analysis confirms that NCLB accountability was a key contributor to increased graduation rates (Harris, et al., 2020). This analysis takes into consideration various graduation measures over the past two decades, including the average freshmen graduation rate (AFGR) and the current federally mandated adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR). The different graduation measures available over different time frames allows a nuanced analyses of accountability effects.

EQUITY CHALLENGES

▶ School accountability pressures negatively affected student behavior. Schools failing AYP had an increasing number of reported student misbehaviors such as suspensions, fights, and offenses reportable to law enforcement. These observations were most visible among low-performing and 'minority' (i.e., Black and Latinx) students (Holbein and Ladd, 2015).

▶ From 2012 to 2016, the percentage of students suspended decreased as school districts implemented discipline reform. The USDOE issued guidance to reduce racial disparities in discipline. Unfortunately, racial disparities in school discipline persist. A recent analysis found that racial disparities in school-based disciplinary actions are associated with county-level racial bias rates (Riddle and Sinclair, 2019).

U.S. GRADUATION RATES OVER 45 YEARS
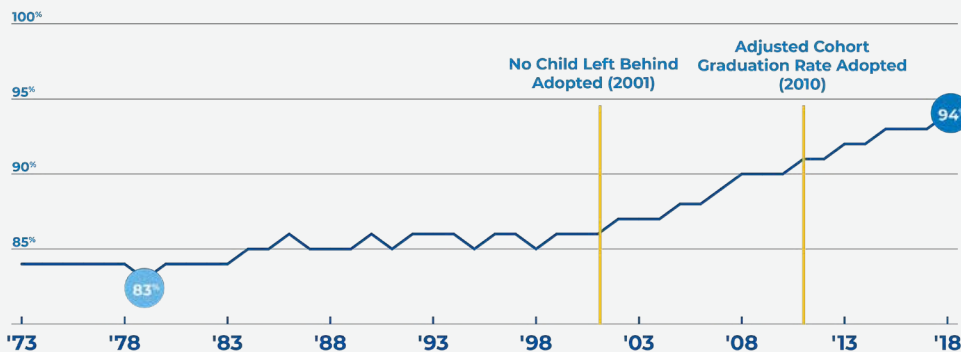
SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, Table 219.65. High school completion rate of 18-to-24-year-olds

NOTE: Annual graduation rates have been rounded to the nearest whole number

HIGH | 2018, 94%
LOW | 1979, 83%

STANDARDS-BASED REFORM AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

05 While SBR motivated districts and schools to implement school improvement strategies, states faced severe challenges due to inadequate funding levels and technical capacity limitations.

School and Classroom Practices

▶ Multiple studies have concluded that accountability systems with high-stakes testing influence what teachers and administrators do (Center on Education Policy, 2006; Goertz, 2007; Hamilton, 2003; Lane, Parke, & Stone, 2002; Stecher, 2002, Stecher et al., 2008).

▶ Robust accountability systems serve as a motivating factor for administrators and teachers to use strategies such as new aligned curriculum, data analysis to guide improvement, professional development, and new instructional supports, such as curriculum coaches, to improve teaching (Hamilton et al., 2008; Hamilton et al., 2012, Weinbaum, et al., 2012).

▶ A study of Pennsylvania schools found that low-performing and high-performing schools did not differ in the improvement strategies used. However, low-performing schools implemented more reform strategies than high-performing schools (Weinbaum et al., 2012).

▶ SBR, particularly during the NCLB era, increased math and English Language Arts instructional time (Dee, Jacob, and Schwartz, 2013).

> "Multiple studies have concluded that accountability systems with high-stakes testing influence what teachers and administrators do"

Transparent Student Performance Data

▶ The availability of more reliable and transparent student achievement and school quality (teaching staff, ratings) data are attributed to SBR, especially during the NCLB era (Spurrier et al., 2020).

▶ Data in accountability systems facilitate the identification of low-performing schools and the delivery of specific interventions to improve student learning (Spurrier et al., 2020).

▶ Turnaround interventions funded through the RTT School Improvement Grant (SIG) program resulted in measurable improvements in student performance for some states and districts (Spurrier et al., 2020).
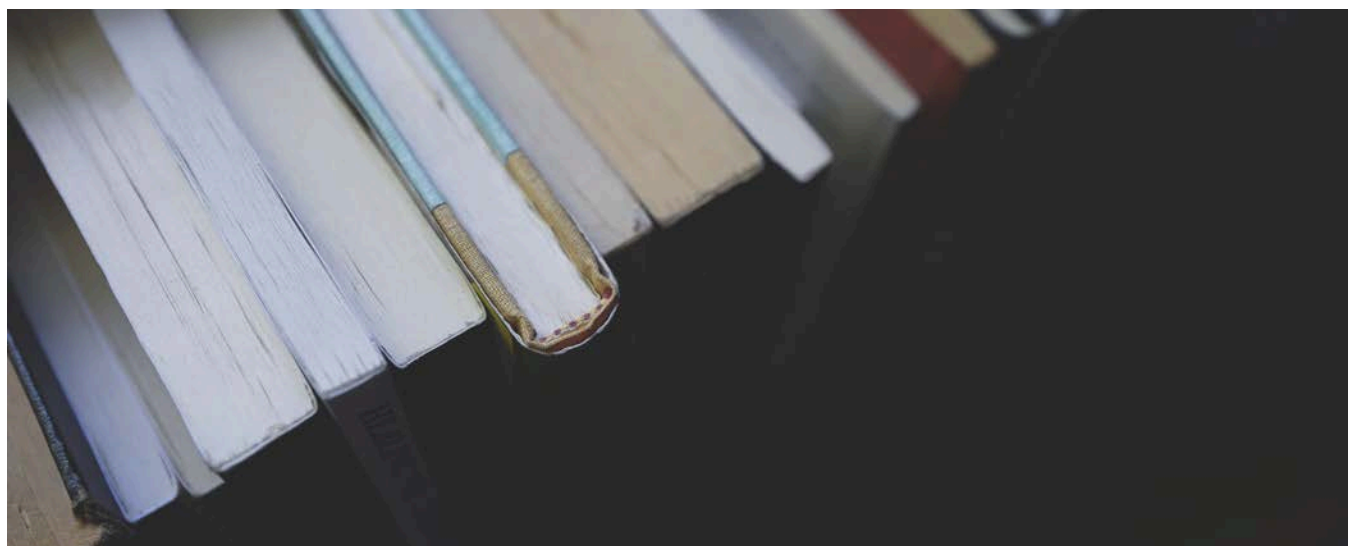
School Finances

▶ Using per-pupil expenditure data from the Common Core of Data and School District Finance Survey,[8] Lee and Wong (2004) found minimal increase in state expenditures between 1991 and 2001. The researchers created a policy index score and classified states into three groups: strong accountability systems, moderate, and weak. Using regression and correlation analyses, Lee and Wong (2004) find no significant differences in school funding between strong and weak accountability states. Moreover, the analysis of SBR and funding in the 1990s found school districts that served larger proportions of low-income and Black or Latino students spent less on education (Lee, 2004).

▶ According to one study, NCLB led to increased spending on direct instruction and pupil-support services. While Dee, et al (2013) analysis reveal increased expenditures, teachers and principals viewed NCLB as an "unfunded mandate" (Olson, 2003). Further analysis by Dee, et.al. (2013) show increased expenditures were derived mainly from state and local revenue, and not federal funding.

▶ Although the study could not pinpoint with great specificity how dollars were spent, it did find evidence of increased teacher compensation, particularly in high-poverty school districts (Dee, Jacob, and Schwartz, 2013). Meanwhile, teacher-student ratios (number of teachers to students) and class size remained unchanged during NCLB.

▶ There is mixed evidence of the effects of teacher salary and pupil-teacher ratio on the achievement of racial and ethnic student populations, post NCLB. In a separate study, Lee and Reeves (2012) find increases in teacher salary led to a widening racial/ethnic achievement gaps whereas decreased teacher-student ratios reduced achievement gaps. The researchers infer more experienced teachers, which receive higher salaries, were likely transferring into higher performing (i.e., majority White) schools, and hence widening the achievement gap.

EQUITY CHALLENGES

▶ There was a shortage of qualified teachers in math, particularly within schools serving majority low-income and students of color (Lee and Reeves, 2012).

▶ Pre-NCLB and during NCLB, diversifying the teacher workforce and addressing teachers' implicit bias were not embedded in district or school improvement plans, policies or practices.

▶ There is tension between when accountability sanctions are applied and the time school leaders and educators are given to demonstrate improvement. In other words, school leaders and educators report not receiving sufficient time to improve their schools. **As a result, evidence points to practices of narrowing instruction to tested subject areas or tested material** (Chiang, 2009; Guisond et al., 2012).

▶ Research does not find widespread use of disaggregated data to inform practices. One study finds that schools generally use data and school improvement strategies in similar ways, regardless of the particular subgroup that is underperforming (Weinbaum et al., 2012).

▶ Although providing low-performing schools with financial and technical support might be potentially cost-effective, this approach shortchanges the long-term need for statewide investment in schools, such as more qualified teachers and smaller classes (Lee and Reeves, 2012).

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[8] **The CCD and F-33 datasets provide a census of all school districts in every state.**

06
SBR attempted to remedy inequities by shifting the focus to instruction and student outcomes. However, these attempts were not centered on addressing racial and socioeconomic academic disparities.

Pre-NCLB

▶ An analysis found that, in the 1990s, states did not address racial and socioeconomic disparities in school resources and failed to narrow the achievement gaps among racial and socioeconomic groups (Lee and Wong, 2004).

▶ In the 1990s, national reading and math test scores for White students remained flat while scores for Black students declined in reading and math. For Latino students, scores decreased in reading and increased in math (Anderson, 2007; Lee and Wong, 2004).

▶ Nationally, Black–White math achievement gaps remained the same from 1990 to 2000. Likewise, Hispanic–White math achievement gaps hardly changed in that decade (Anderson, 2007; Hanushek and Raymond, 2005).

▶ Researchers speculate that greater progress toward equity might have occurred from 1990-2000 if states' SBR efforts and policies were directed at closing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps (Anderson, 2007; Lee and Wong, 2004)

07
While NCLB addressed academic disparities, it did not achieve its goal of racial and socioeconomic equity.

NCLB

▶ NCLB is recognized for bringing to light achievement disparities by student subgroups. However, the policy's use of sanctions for underperforming schools is controversial.

▶ NCLB included a competitive market perspective by offering parents of students in underperforming schools the option to transfer to another school. Yet, school transfers did not always guarantee a better-quality education. For example, in Rhode Island, students who enrolled in higher-performing schools were more likely to see gains, but nonwhite students and low-performing students are less likely to end up at such schools (Goss, 2020).

▶ Although NCLB provided a federal mandate for states to develop statewide systems of support intended to build the capacity of underperforming districts and schools, this new expectation for an enhanced role of state education agencies in school improvement faced serious challenges due to agencies' fiscal, administrative, and technical capacity limitations (Lee and Reeves, 2012).

▶ States targeted financial and technical support for schools identified as needing improvement under NCLB. Researchers suggest this approach shortchanged the long-term need for statewide educational investment in school/classroom level infrastructures such as more qualified teachers and smaller classes (Lee and Reeves, 2012).

08 Although ESSA, as written, has the potential to advance educational equity and eliminate structural inequities, some states and ED are retreating from equity.

▶ ESSA provides flexibility for states to explore ways to measure and address equity. For example, approximately half (n=23) of the states' educator equity plans mention strategies towards diversifying the teacher workforce and developing teacher cultural competency and culturally responsive practices (Chu, 2019).

▶ Through ESSA, states can expand their attention to factors that shape students' opportunities to learn (e.g., school climate) that, if addressed, can produce much greater equity (Kostyo et al., 2018).

▶ An equity analysis of state-approved ESSA plans found that all but four state ESSA plans use an equity-centered approach such as equitable access to educational resources, funding and effective educators.. Less than half of state plans attend to equity in outcomes (Chu, 2019). Noteworthy, most state ESSA plans do not include a clear definition of what is meant by "equity."

▶ ESSA state plans continue to rely on standardized test performance to assess equity policies and approaches (Chu, 2019). The researcher notes that "incoherent policy principles, coupled with the market-oriented, standards-based policy solutions, may exacerbate the structural inequities facing schools and students that these policies aim to ameliorate."

Noteworthy, most state ESSA plans do not include a clear definition of what is meant by equity.

CLOSING REMARKS

Since the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education and 1965 ESEA, many efforts have attempted to desegregate schools and support low-income students and students of color. Yet, early SBR efforts were driven by US students' dismal performance on an international stage; specifically, the flat academic performance of White students.

Over time, SBR efforts shifted towards highlighting racial achievement gaps and addressing them through federal policy, beginning with NCLB. While a key feature of SBR is providing states technical assistance and supports, this was overshadowed by accountability and assessment during the NCLB era.

After enduring the test-based reforms of NCLB and still having persistent racial disparities in academic outcomes, ongoing debate remains about the role of standardized assessments. On one hand, standarized assessments provide a measure of student achievement. On the other hand, assessments center the issue on students with the least access to high-quality schools and educational opportunities — Black, Latinx, and Native/Indigenous students and those living in poverty.

To further complicate things, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic forced most school districts to cancel spring 2020 testing and could have the same effect in Spring 2021. Proponents of standardized testing are concerned that the pandemic could provide leverage to oppositional groups and eliminate testing altogether. Standardized assessments are likely to continue playing a role, but they cannot be the driving force for school improvement, especially if the goal is addressing structural inequities in the US education system.

While research suggests that SBR positively influences student attendance, teacher and administrator practices, and student achievement, challenges remain. Some states and districts circumvent accountability requirements. Others, particularly those serving low-income and students of color, face continued sanctions.

As policymakers and education leaders consider the direction of federal accountability policy, they will need to reflect on its influence in spurring states, districts, and schools to fully adopt standards-based reforms and grapple with and rectify the adverse consequences of high-stakes accountability.

	+ STRENGTHS	**- CHALLENGES**
1994-2000 IMPROVING AMERICA'S SCHOOL ACT (IASA) **NOTE** While IASA shifted the focus to the instructional materials needed for teaching and learning, there were no changes to funding for capacity building.	▶ Encouraged states to develop and adopt standards and school improvement plans in exchange for grants ▶ Introduced grade-level assessments aligned to standards ▶ Tied grants (Title 1 funds) to the development of standards and administration of assessments ▶ Required states to use Title 1 for school improvement ▶ Added "opportunity to learn (OTL)" standards as optional. OTL focuses on school capacity (materials, instructional practices, and school conditions) to deliver high-quality instruction	▶ Standards were not always rigorous ▶ Curriculum and instruction were not always aligned to standards ▶ Assessments were not always aligned to standards ▶ Assessments were administered "at some time" between grades 3 and 5, again between grades 6 and 9, and again between grades 10 and 12.
2001-2015 NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND (NCLB) **NOTE** One report cites that at least 19 states changed how they defined AYP. In 2004-05 and 2005-06, as more middle-class districts were being identified for improvement (i.e., not meeting AYP), there was great pushback and changes to the AYP definition.	▶ Accelerated adoption of standards ▶ Increased rigor of standards ▶ Required assessments aligned to standards, administered annually in grades 3-8 and grade 10 ▶ Required annual reporting of disaggregated student achievement as measured on assessments (AYP) ▶ Disaggregated student data revealed racial and SES achievement gaps ▶ More districts and schools aligned curriculum to standards ▶ Progress towards national, rigorous standards (CCSS) ▶ As more states embraced CCSS, a consortia of states began using common assessments (PARCC and SMART)	▶ States were given autonomy to define AYP, and states were frequently changing how they defined AYP. ▶ States and districts began to redefine AYP to avoid being identified as failing or in need of improvement. For example, a district could base AYP on one school level (elementary, middle or high school) instead of all three levels. ▶ States were given autonomy to determine the number of subgroups. The range of subgroups ranged from four to 10 across states. ▶ Districts serving mainly low-income students and students of color have more performance targets (subgroups) compared to more homogeneous districts. As a result, these schools are more likely to remain under sanction while other districts are able to mask their achievement gaps. ▶ Even when high-poverty schools improve, they continue to not meet AYP

+ STRENGTHS

- CHALLENGES

2015-2020 EVERY CHILD SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA)

+ STRENGTHS

▶ Asks states to equitably distribute effective teachers

▶ Increased flexibility

▶ Invited states to expand their measure of student achievement and school quality beyond assessments (e.g., English language proficiency; graduation rate; and school quality)

NOTE

Lowest performing schools are still not receiving the support and resources they need.

- CHALLENGES

▶ Guardrails to promote equity

▶ Removed highly qualified teacher provision

▶ States set their own subgroup size, which can reduce the level of available disaggregated data

▶ Most states are masking subgroup performance by using summative averages across all students or only including some subgroups

▶ Some states have set up two separate accountability systems: one for ESSA reporting purposes and one for the state

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