



Focus Group Report 2009

A report of the thoughts, ideas and feelings of middle school and high school students in Flagler County Schools. This report is completely anecdotal; however, it expresses the views and concerns of a diverse group of students and can be used to develop programs, policies, and interventions to better serve the youth of Flagler County.

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Focus on Flagler Youth Coalition, Inc.

2009 Focus Groups Final Report

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2009 Focus Groups

FINAL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The Focus on Flagler Youth Coalition, Inc. (FFYC) conducted a series of youth-based focus groups with Flagler County public school students who attended both middle and high schools. The focus groups were developed as a two-part session. The first session was conducted from March 31, 2009 through April 6, 2009. The second session took place from May 11, 2009 through May 15, 2009. The schools involved were: Buddy Taylor and Indian Trails Middle Schools, Flagler Palm Coast and Matanzas High Schools and Pathways Academy. Approximately 180 students, with 75 percent being from middle school, were involved in the two-part series with the exception of one school that only participated in one session. After completing both parts, a total of 17 sessions were conducted. Each session consisted of up to 20 students, with the exception of one high school group that had approximately 30 students.

PURPOSE

The purposes of the focus groups were: 1) to gather the thoughts, feelings and ideas of area youth regarding their exposure to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, 2) to assess family and community barriers that inhibit youth from reaching their full potential and 3) to generate ideas for future programming, policies and strategies.

METHODOLOGY

The middle school students were separated by their grade and selected by their guidance counselors to ensure cultural, academic and socioeconomic diversity. The grades involved at the middle schools were 6th, 7th and 8th. Each student who participated at the middle schools had to return signed permission slips by their parent/guardians prior to participating in the group. The high school students were not separated by grade and consisted of 9th through 12th graders. The high school students were also identified by school personnel. Two of the high school groups were active members of their Student Government Association and other students identified by school administrators. One of the high school groups were students from an alternative school. All focus groups were conducted by an adult facilitator at the

participants' school during a regularly-scheduled school day. The facilitators were both coalition staff as well as local youth-serving professionals. Each was provided with a facilitators' guide prior to the focus groups in order to assist in preparation and ensure consistency in the areas being discussed. In order to establish group cohesion, each session presented a list of expectations that acknowledged confidentiality and encouraged full participation from all participants. The sessions incorporated an open-discussion format that generated questions and answers as it related to three core areas: Substance Use, Family and Community Concerns, and Open Discussion (for other topics that participants wanted to discuss). Food was provided for the participants and tobacco-free water bottles and bracelets were given as an incentive for participating. All of the participants' identities remain anonymous.

FINDINGS

Sixth Graders at Indian Trails Middle School

Session One:

SUBSTANCE USE The group appeared to have a firm grasp of the problems associated with drug use as it related to health as well as the risks of overdosing. They also identified the desire to be cool and pressure from their peers as common reasons why youth their age start using drugs. The youth listed various types of drugs including weed, pot, cocaine, crack, marijuana, heroin, pills and the sniffing of Sharpies/Expo Markers, glue and GermX. Alcohol and tobacco were not mentioned. One of the participants disclosed that she currently smokes cigarettes. They felt that parents had a strong influence on whether or not youth will use stating, "If parents do it, then their children do it." They thought that ways to address substance use was to have people who have used drugs, speak about their experiences and also provide counseling. ***FAMILY & COMMUNITY*** The youth identified several family and community concerns. They listed drug addiction, "family split up" separation/divorce, incarceration, death, money problems/layoffs, and domestic violence as family concerns. They listed crime/robbery, shootings, improperly disposing cigarettes and causing forest fires, kidnapping, pollution and global warming as community concerns. As ideas to improve the community, the participants suggested a movie theater, theme park, after-school programs, recycling programs, a mall, employment for youth and adults, a teen club on weekends, helping the poor, lowering gas prices and giving more money to the schools for programming and better "stuff". ***OPEN DISCUSSION*** The participants added that the following are also concerns that were not previously addressed: gaining parents' permission to participate in things when they are happening is difficult and not having money or transportation to get to the activities, stress management and support for people with disabilities was suggested and they stated there is too much homework and chores and not enough time. They also added that gangs and teen pregnancy are problems that they are

facing, in addition to the rezoning of the school district. Divorce, pollution, lack of transportation and money problems were repeatedly raised.

Session Two:

A majority (7 out of 13) of the participants stated that their parents currently smoke and that their friends are smoking also. Five of the participants stated that their parents drink alcohol and one smokes weed. Some of the youth have been exposed to, through extended family members, people who smoke crack (5), sniff cocaine (5) and shoot drugs (3). Six people disclosed that they were currently in relationships. They were concerned about bullying, cutting trees, kidnapping, gambling, raping, gangs, war, child abuse, fighting and the economy. The group stated that they would like to see more dances and under-18 clubs, like “Razzles” in Daytona Beach, as well as, game rooms and movie theaters.

Sixth Graders at Buddy Taylor Middle School

Session One:

SUBSTANCE USE (TOBACCO) The students stated that their peers think smoking looks cool. They had a firm grasp of the risks associated with tobacco and spoke of addiction and cancer. They reported that students smoke on the way home from school. Information about costs, chain smoking and chewing tobacco were raised. They added that when parents smoke it makes their children smoke. They discussed how there are lots of ways to quit and cited gum, pills and electric simulation cigarettes. They felt that people who smoke think that it will not affect them. **(ALCOHOL)** The students discussed the difference between beer and liquor, they stated liquor is stronger and you get drunk faster. They discussed the bodily effects and side effects of alcohol use, including hangovers, losing control and anger explosions. They felt that the media shows alcohol use heavily and media depicts false dramatizations. They felt that people do it because they think it’s cool. There are drinks with flavors that attract youth, such as Jell-o shots, apple pie and cherry as well as Rum Balls (chocolate with rum inside). They said parents are leaving it out and although they thought it was acceptable for parents to drink responsibly, they stated that they should not do it in front of their children. They are also exposed to alcohol at events and theme parks where people are openly drinking. **(OTHER DRUGS)** They understood that drugs are very addictive and identified different types of drugs such as cocaine, crystal meth, marijuana, crack, Oxycotin, Loratab. They felt these drugs are easier to get and less expensive. They stated that some students sniff household cleaners as well. They added that marijuana should be available for health reasons and discussed legalization. They said if it is going to help people it should be legal but it should not be made available in stores, it will cause robberies and people will try to get it because they want to make money.

Session Two:

As suggestions for ideas the students mentioned starting a “Go Green Group” and having healthier options for lunch. (TOBACCO) They felt that the price increase is a good idea however their parents and family members can’t and won’t stop. Some of their friends are also smoking and a majority of people think it is cool. A majority of the students stated that they have friends who dip and there needs to be more anti-tobacco programs. (ALCOHOL) A majority of the students stated they have tried alcohol and they know students who drink. They thought that adding SADD as an elective or required class may be beneficial. They also felt sports programs were helpful.

Seventh Graders at Indian Trails Middle School

Session One:

(TOBACCO) A majority of students admitted smoking cigarettes or chewing tobacco at least once. A majority of students also stated they have peers who smoke regularly. When asked where they get cigarettes and other tobacco products, the students answered: from parents (without permission), older friends, siblings, and other relatives. When asked why they tried cigarettes, students’ answers were: to see what it was like, to be cool, and to be like an older sibling or a parent. (ALCOHOL) All but one student admitted trying alcohol at least once. Of the students who admitted drinking alcohol at least once, the majority stated they got the alcohol from a family member; most indicated it was without the family member’s knowledge. One student stated her parent drinks regularly and she finishes the drinks she leaves around. Another student reported similar circumstances with another relative. Another student reported having parental permission to consume alcohol while at home; she stated it was permissible in their cultural. Other places or persons where students got alcohol were: high school students, older siblings, and unattended “alcohol stashes” at family parties. Three students indicated they had been drunk at least two times. (OTHER DRUGS) One student admitted smoking marijuana. Many students felt prescription drug abuse was a problem among their peers but none of them engaged in such activity. (COMMUNITY) Six students stated they know of illegal and illicit activities that take place at the Indian Trails Sports Complex, after hours. Students said their peers go there to “do drugs”, smoke, drink, and engage in sexual activities in the bathrooms. (SCHOOL) A majority of students indicated that overall, they are happy with the staff and administration at ITMS. All of the students expressed a need for more extracurricular activities and student groups. Students expressed a need for sex education in school. Three students reported already engaging in sexual activities and intercourse. Students didn’t feel the abstinence only message was effective.

Session Two:

(TOBACCO) No changes from first meeting. (ALCOHOL) One student indicated a change in behavior and attitude towards alcohol. Although she still admitted to drinking occasionally, she does not drink as much and she doesn't drink "to get drunk". (COMMUNITY) The reported activities at the Indian Trials Sports Complex continued. Three students indicated they would like someone to talk to about issues they are facing. When asked about common issues they worry about, students listed: divorce, bullying, weight, self-esteem, family finances and peer-pressure as some of their main issues. (SCHOOL) Students would like to have more dances and school assemblies. A majority of students think they should have more assemblies that address many of the issues they are facing.

Seventh Graders at Buddy Taylor Middle School

Session One:

(TOBACCO) A majority of students stated that they know youth who smoke. Most of them smoke on the trail. They have experienced with their peers and older siblings have been forced by adults. Some have smoked Black and Milds (mini cigars) and one student was currently still smoking. They get them from friends the same age. They also added that eight to eleven year olds are also experimenting with tobacco. One student shared that their parent started smoking at a young age (13) and still smokes after several attempts to quit. Other students shared that their parents smoke weed and one found it in their mother's purse. They said parents have more influence over their children and their peers do try to persuade them to smoke by pressuring or teasing them. Some students take pride in their tobacco use and some that don't smoke say that they do. The students stated that problems at home increase all drug use because smoking cigarettes and weed or drinking alcohol takes the stress away. They shared that some students bring dip to school and there are some incidents in the bathroom and boys locker room. (ALCOHOL) Some of the students admitted to drinking alcohol and one student stated that she tried on accident by sipping on mother's cup not knowing what it was. One stated they actually got alcohol poisoning. There was a student who stated that their mom drinks a lot because of stress and allows them to take sips. Some friends of the same age drink regularly on the weekends and get it from their own houses. They identified stress and not fitting in as major concerns that contribute to use. They thought that finding out what happens to other people and what others think could be helpful. (PRESCRIPTION DRUGS) One of the youth stated that their mom was using prescription drugs for pain due to an injury and she does better without using them. One student stated that a doctor prescribed 500mg of codeine and it was too much so they did not end up using it. Another student knows someone who uses and sells other people's drugs; that student also witnessed someone snorting. (WEED) A lot of students know people who sell and use weed, some specifically mentioned their own siblings. One student added that their sibling is a hypocrite saying how good weed is then saying not to

do it. They share a room and can smell it all day. Some siblings have actually tried to get them to use. Parents are aware of their children smoking weed but not selling weed. (OTHER) Suggestions that the students gave were: to start a group to get them to do healthier things, conduct classes on coping skills – not just talking about stuff but doing stuff, provide free or affordable after-school and weekend activities, have youth dances, and allow people who've experienced drug use to share it with their story with youth because knowing the consequences would help. They added that Red Ribbon Week is good as a reminder but not for those who have already started.

Session Two:

The students stated that there are cameras in the portables so people smoke in the bathrooms. They added that a local business, which is now no longer open, was giving out cigarettes and people are engaging in sexual activity there. They said that football players are using pills. They stated that referrals don't work in addressing fights and there needs to be conflict resolution and psychiatry. They felt that when paraphernalia is found, parent should be sent for intervention and youth to "juvi" or Pathways. They said there should be special classes for people who are caught and more clubs and/or groups: arts, academic, and athletic. Some stated that they have been approached to use drugs and refused, while others stated they have been approached and did try them.

Eighth Graders at Indian Trails Middle School

Session One:

The youth mainly spoke about drug/alcohol use for youth in their age group. They discussed that there is a lot of youth that are stealing pills from their parents' prescriptions and taking them or faking symptoms to get them. These scripts include, Xanax and Loratabs. They also stated that the parents have no idea that this is occurring. The youth stated that there are a lot of youth that use alcohol and that it is easily accessible as many older youth will buy for underage kids, they are also opening it up in the stores, getting it from parents, or buying it without being asked for identification. Some students are smoking marijuana and buying it from older cousins and older friends or grow it themselves. Cigarettes are obtained from parents, older friends, adult strangers, and some get it from gas stations. The youth also spoke that the efforts that Focus does during Red Ribbon Week are looked at as a joke. That mainly the youth who will wear our stay drug-free bracelets are the youth that are using the most drugs. They stated that they don't feel sorry when people come in and talk about the loss of their son or daughter as they feel that it was their fault for getting involved with drugs or alcohol. They stated that what would be effective is if we could show them what it is like to be drunk without actually being drunk and what it is like to be high without getting high. They stated that usually

what starts kids using drugs or alcohol is curiosity. Also that many of their parents drink or use drugs so they think it is okay to do as well.

Session Two:

(TOBACCO) No changes from first meeting. (ALCOHOL) Several students discussed that they all know youth that drink. Some have admitted to drinking and stated that their parents have struggled with alcoholism and typically that is where they are getting their alcohol from.

(COMMUNITY) No change from first meeting. (SCHOOL) Most students were concerned about the transition from middle school to high school. Many are nervous about the unknown high school years and what they will be getting involved in as far as extra-curricular activities.

Eighth Graders at Buddy Taylor Middle School

Session One:

(TOBACCO) The students discussed that their peers think it is cool to smoke and that they do it because of stress and family issues or their family members and peers smoke. They are allowed to hang out and smoke at a local business, which is now no longer open. Some of the students knew someone who died from smoking. They stated that people need more information, their background affects their attitude about smoking and some people will not stop due to addiction. Some students wanted more stories from those who have had personal experiences with tobacco. Eight of the students stated they currently smoke. They said parents play a role in initiation and youth get their cigarettes from them. They added that tobacco is easier to get than alcohol because it's less noticeable if you take a cigarette from a pack versus a beer from a six pack. (ALCOHOL) They stated that there are lots of house parties where there is underage drinking and lots of "hard stuff" available. There are adults present at these parties but they don't see the youth drinking. Eight of the youth stated that they do drink alcohol, most of them tried it once and they added that youth are drinking at a local business, which is now no longer open. They felt they needed to see the consequences of drinking. (PRESCRIPTION DRUGS) The youth did not identify prescription drug use as a major problem. They just mentioned that they take their own medications that are prescribed to them. (WEED) It was mentioned that they smell weed coming from houses on their way walking home from school and that there is a house that grows weed in their neighborhood, specifically in the P section and Mondex. They felt that students are smoking more weed than they do cigarettes and heard that it is happening on high school buses. (FAMILY & COMMUNITY) The youth felt that families are falling apart due to money issues, break-ups, and/or one parent having to leave to find work. They said parents are too busy. They also felt that they are heavily harassed by police and that the cops need more supervision. They added that the police should focus more on their safety; specifically at major crosswalks when leaving school and that the officers need youth sensitivity/cultural competency training. The students said they cope with their stress by

hanging with friends and extended family or playing sports. (OTHER) The youth wanted to see more after-school activities, more parks, more transportation options, youth centers, movie theaters, malls, concerts in the park or at the pier, and fishing clubs. They looked forward to the SNL (Saturday Night Live) event that is held at a local church.

Session Two:

The students stated that more kids are using drugs everywhere and especially at the beach. The youth perceived that theft is becoming a big problem in the community as well as more beer cans and bottles being disposed on the side of the road. They felt that much could not be done to stop people from using and that more should be done to reach people before they start. They stated more youth are using dip because it's easier to get, it can't be counted and it's cheaper. They mentioned the issue of searching students at school and there was a mix of those who agree and disagree with it. They felt that it should be a process that is fair and non-humiliating. They stated that teachers do not address if a student is under the influence. Parental influence was a key topic discussed. They stated that parents don't ask questions and that they model the behavior. If the kids give them information they ignore it and often feel attacked. Peer counseling was mentioned as something worth implementing as well as having people share their experiences with students. They stated that live-monitored surveillance will help versus having it recorded, then viewed. Lack of transportation was stated as a major obstacle in getting to things. The youth wanted more things to do after school. Chain texting and MySpace are main sources of communication for them.

Matanzas High School

SUBSTANCE USE (TOBACCO) The participants stated that a lot of their peers do smoke and they ask older friends to buy, usually the students involved in activities do not smoke as much. Students go to their cars to smoke on campus. They stated that the students will get suspended if caught chewing tobacco then they are expelled. They felt that smoking is more popular among the younger kids versus the older ones and they do it as a fad and to look cool. They stated that adults are also smoking on campus and they can smell it in the hallways, but they rarely get caught. They felt that alcohol was more of an issue than tobacco. One participant stated that her sibling who is in 6th grade is bringing up inappropriate stuff and that they are doing "Pharm Parties" – pouring a mixture of pills into a bowl and taking them all together. They suggested that programs start with the younger group because it's harder to reach people when they are older. ***(ALCOHOL)*** The participants said that teens are drinking at house parties at friends' houses and sometimes the parents are not there. They get the alcohol from older friends and their parents' closets. Most of the time they have a designated driver or they will spend the night. They felt that there should be more things built in Palm Coast and more things to do like comedy, open mic and dance competitions, but those who do drink will probably still

do so before going. They stated that people feel less self-conscious and more outgoing when they are drinking. They added that everyone knows the consequences but it doesn't have an impact until something drastic happens. The more they have pressure not to use, the more they will use because they are rebelling. However, they still felt that there needs to be more to do and identified money and transportation as barriers. They stated that youth who have more freedom from parents do less risky behaviors. They don't feel they need to drink, only when they are at parties and it's available; if it's not in their face and they were at concerts, fairs or something different, they would not do it. (WEED) The participants stated that a majority of their friends smoke weed and their parents accept it. They stated that it is becoming more acceptable overall and that many students are smoking before school. Some of the students stated that they can smell weed and cigarette smoke on the buses. They felt that teachers do not want to falsely accuse someone for smoking weed so they do not usually get addressed. They discussed the controversy of marijuana legalization versus tobacco and the health risks associated with both. The participants stated that weed is easier to buy and more accessible and that a lot of people do not know the true side effects of smoking weed. They felt that the Truth.com ads are good but the other campaigns are not that effective. It was suggested that events for seniors to help them prepare for college life as it relates to some of the risky behaviors and freshman naiveté, would be beneficial. (PARENTS) The participants stated that the parents are feeling powerless and needing advice. They added that cultural norms may influence youth in thinking drinking is natural. They shared that the parents teach the limits and the children learn to set healthy limits. Some felt that minimizing the limits may minimize use while they also felt that more strict limits will make youth more rebellious. Parents are oblivious and most youth are not going to get caught. They did agree that parents are very influential on their children. Some parents allow their children to drink and prefer they do it at home so that they are safer. Some parents try to be cool and fit in with their child's friends. Saying do as I say, not as I do, does not work. When divorce is going on parents tend to pay less attention to their children and become more lenient. If the parents teach the consequences and how to make good choices young, and maintain a good relationship with their children, they will be less likely to use drugs. (OTHER) They stated that the drinking age laws are very contradictory because you can sign up to go to war at age 18 but not drink until you are 21, they felt that laws do not change use. Being involved in activities keeps you too busy to get involved in trouble, who you hang with makes a difference as well as older siblings. Ultimately, there are influences everywhere, peers, family, media, internet, movies, and society. They felt that basically everything starts at home and if we wanted to be effective start with the younger group (under 16 or 5th graders), build relationships between parents and children, and find a way to get parents involved, they felt they needed to be more active. They felt that kids are often alone, everyone is too busy, and no one cares. Parents are not aware to what extent things go on as it relates to sexual activity and drug use, they do not expect it. Prescription

drugs are becoming more prevalent among high school students and younger. Some are snorting pills. The street value is high for Morphine and Adderall. Ecstasy has been used a lot more recently and is easily disguisable. Sex was another issue raised. They felt protection should be available and there is no access to safe-sex barriers or no money to purchase. Some youth are currently engaged in sex competitions trying to accumulate the most sex partners. They stated that health education consists of fitness and nutrition not information about sex. They felt some work needs to be done with females on building self-esteem and scare tactics will work as prevention efforts.

Flagler Palm Coast High School

Two participants disclosed that they smoke cigarettes and everyone acknowledged that they know a peer who does. Three participants disclosed that they smoke weed occasionally and that they have friends who smoke daily. They cover the smell up with perfume or Axe. They stated everyone drinks at parties and special occasions. Nobody drinks and drives; there is always a designated driver. They stated, "The person who smokes (weed) drives; the person who drinks rides." They said that with education they know that smoking weed is not as bad as drinking and a lot of people smoke and drive. They added that steroid use is big with football players and although they are tested, they know when the test is, it is not random. They felt the sports players get away with everything and get unfair or different consequences when they do something wrong, it is usually less severe. There is no process for resolving issues with teachers and no one believes a student over a teacher, unless a teacher is doing something sexual. Fighting is always a problem and it usually stems from relationships, possessiveness and gossip; the people who fight want attention. It appears that the administration is too quick to send people to pathways and it does not solve the fighting. People like to go there to raise their GPAs because it's easier. Guidance and administration don't seem to know their role. They added that there were five pregnant girls last month, and stated the need for a teen pregnancy prevention program. Abstinence only doesn't work. They felt no one wants to talk about it and truly educate them on the facts. Parents need to talk about sex and health class does not address it. Sex education should be by itself and include relationships plus the emotional aspects. It is ill-explained and the middle school students know more now. Guys are losing their virginity earlier. Older guys are targeting younger girls, there are 7th graders dating 11th graders. They stated that there is currently an eighth grader pregnant by a sophomore. They do not need to learn just the consequences; it should be based on grade level and continuous throughout the years, including both physical and emotional aspects. People are missing the point at the Health Fairs; they felt you just get information and win prizes.

Pathways Academy

An overwhelming majority of participants admitted to currently using tobacco, alcohol, and prescription drugs. They also disclosed that they have all been sexually active and two of the participants were pregnant. A majority of the students stated that they were in the alternative school for fighting. Some were there for drugs or criminal activity such as armed robbery, grand/petty theft. Most were from Flagler Palm Coast High School while others were from ATC, MHS, and Briggs Academy. Racial concerns were raised during the discussion with people feeling that students of other races get disciplined differently at the schools and the same goes for football players. Some students were bothered that other students can wear confederate flags. This triggered an in-depth discussion about cultural sensitivity, inter-racial dating and attitudes formed while growing up and reinforced by family. They felt there was less segregation among students at MHS versus FPC. Most of the males were involved in drag racing and stated that it brings everyone together from different backgrounds. They stated that the people they hung with and money influenced their decisions to engage in criminal activity. They were happy at Pathways because they can focus more on their grades, it seems better and the staff treats students better. Two of the participants were at Pathways their second time. They felt that they need more stuff to do even though people will bring trouble to the things. There were also concerns of police harassment from Flagler Beach police for minor things like bike lights and helmets or pants sagging. They added that the officers plant stuff or increase the quantity of substances when charging people. They suggested that people not be judgmental and stop stigmatizing Pathways students. They asked for clarity in why it is policy to be expelled from school prior to being convicted of a crime. The girls would like cooking, basketball or other programs.

CONCLUSION

It was apparent that the sixth grade students were highly exposed to alcohol, tobacco and other substances, however their level of engagement in risky behavior and community concerns were somewhat different than the students from upper grade levels. This indicates that a specific level of prevention and intervention strategies may be required to appropriately address this age group. Another common theme throughout the focus group sessions was the role of parents both in providing illegal substances and modeling risk-taking behavior. Parents remain a key component in prevention techniques and need specific targeting that incorporates drug education, parenting education and healthy coping strategies. It is also evident that awareness needs to be increased around the accessibility to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs being mainly through the youth's own parent/household. Alcohol use is the predominant drug of choice for these participants and programming specific to addressing this issue and enforcing under-age drinking laws is imperative. The topic of sex education remains controversial however there is a clear need for age-appropriate curriculum that entails the risks associated

with the early onset of sexual intercourse. The youth are engaging in unsafe sexual practices and teen pregnancy has become a common issue identified by the participants. It is suggested that there needs to be accessible and affordable resources available to youth pertaining to this topic. Community barriers that remained consistent throughout the focus groups were the lack of transportation, lack of financial resources to aid in participating in extra-curricular activities or events and a general lack of youth-specific after-school programs that target Middle and High School students. As highlighted in the findings, the youth suggested many ideas for youth programming in the community and expressed a desire to participate in such activities. The programs need to be accessible, affordable, engaging and relative to some of the concerns or suggestions that the youth shared.

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