



# Dropout prevention programs in nine Mid-Atlantic Region school districts: additions to a dropout prevention database





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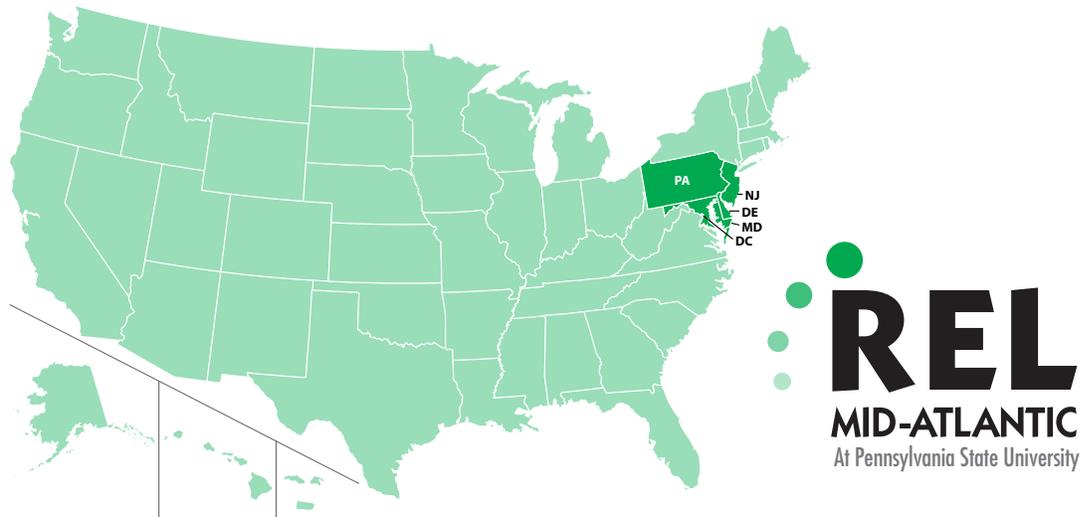
**February 2011**

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**Issues & Answers** is an ongoing series of reports from short-term Fast Response Projects conducted by the regional educational laboratories on current education issues of importance at local, state, and regional levels. Fast Response Project topics change to reflect new issues, as identified through lab outreach and requests for assistance from policymakers and educators at state and local levels and from communities, businesses, parents, families, and youth. All Issues & Answers reports meet Institute of Education Sciences standards for scientifically valid research.

February 2011

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# Dropout prevention programs in nine Mid-Atlantic Region school districts: additions to a dropout prevention database

**This report describes dropout prevention programs identified by respondents in nine school districts in the Mid-Atlantic Region, along with a searchable database of the programs. The programs expand a database developed in an earlier Northeast and Islands Region study. Only 1 of the 58 identified programs has been reviewed for effectiveness by the What Works Clearinghouse.**

Dropping out of high school is a serious concern. It is associated with numerous harmful effects for dropouts and their communities. There is evidence that some dropout prevention programs and policies are effective, but those in use in the Mid-Atlantic Region have not been documented.

The current study replicates work of Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northeast and Islands. It describes dropout prevention programs in nine Mid-Atlantic Region (Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania) school districts serving communities with populations of 24,742–107,250 (as of July 2008). All nine districts have high dropout rates, large racial/ethnic minority student populations, and high percentages of students from households living below the poverty line. The study is driven by two research questions:

- What are the characteristics of dropout prevention programs and policies in the nine districts?
- Which programs have been reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse, and what were its findings?

The study found that:

- No district reported dropout prevention policies apart from those establishing the reported programs.
- Only one program model was reported by more than one district. Because the program was funded and implemented differently in the two districts that reported it, it is treated as two programs.
- The most common core strategies were advocating for student needs (64 percent of programs), engaging and supporting families (57 percent), and monitoring school attendance (53 percent).
- The most common service goals were to improve academic performance (95 percent of programs), decrease truancy (66 percent), and provide support during transitions (60 percent).

- The most common student subgroups targeted were students with academic needs (90 percent of programs), students from low socioeconomic status families (60 percent), and special needs students with behavioral challenges (57 percent).
- Programs that targeted specific grades were most likely to focus on students in grades 9 or 12.
- Teachers were involved in 86 percent of reported programs, guidance counselors in 78 percent, and principals or other administrators in 67 percent.
- The most common forms of community involvement engaged parents (69 percent of programs), youth or social services staff (28 percent), mental health services staff (28 percent), police (22 percent), and mentoring program staff (21 percent). Twelve programs (21 percent) reported no community involvement.
- Districts funded all or part of 79 percent of reported programs; state governments had some financial role in 41 percent, the federal government in 26 percent, and private sources in 7 percent. Four programs (7 percent) did not report a funding source.
- As of May 1, 2010, only 1 of the 58 programs—Talent Development High Schools—had been reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse, which found only one small study that met its evidence standards with reservations.

The results of this study were added to the REL Northeast and Islands database of dropout prevention programs. The database documents local use of dropout prevention programs and indicates which of the reported programs have been reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse. It enables school administrators to identify districts with programs like their own, programs targeting specific student groups, and programs employing core strategies they might want to investigate. The database provides information that could lead to cross-district collaboration in grant seeking or on joint programs with institutions of higher education and other regional institutions and agencies. It will be updated and expanded periodically and can be accessed at [www.relnei.org/research.educational.dropoutdb.php](http://www.relnei.org/research.educational.dropoutdb.php). See box 2 in the main report for a basic guide to using the database and appendix A in Myint-U et al. (2008, revised 2009) for the complete users guide.

**February 2011**

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## WHY THIS STUDY?

Dropping out of high school is a serious concern. It is associated with numerous adverse outcomes for dropouts and their communities. There is evidence that some dropout prevention programs and policies have positive effects, but those in use in the Mid-Atlantic Region have not been documented.

This report describes dropout prevention programs in nine Mid-Atlantic Region (Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania) school districts and a searchable database of such programs. The database supports cross-district collaboration involving dropout prevention strategies and documents local use of programs and strategies reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse for evidence of effectiveness. Both the study and the database replicate work of Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northeast and Islands (Myint-U et al., 2008; revised 2009).

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### Regional need

The REL Northeast and Islands study prompted requests for similar research from state education agency staff in Delaware and New Jersey and from members of the REL Mid-Atlantic Governing Board at a meeting in February 2008. To replicate the REL Northeast and Islands study in the Mid-Atlantic Region, nine school districts with high dropout rates, high percentages of racial/ethnic minority students, and high percentages of students from households living below the poverty line were selected for examination. The districts served communities with populations of 24,742–107,250 (as of July 2008; see box 1 and appendix A for details of the study methodology).

Two research questions drive the report:

- What are the characteristics of dropout prevention programs and policies in the nine districts?
- Which programs have been reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse?

## BOX 1

**Study methodology**

This report replicated the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northeast and Islands study in sample selection and data collection (Myint-U et al. 2008, revised 2009).

*Selecting the sample.* A list of districts serving mid-size cities in each Mid-Atlantic Region state was compiled using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) definition of mid-size city (a population of less than 250,000; National Center for Education Statistics 2008). The districts were merged into a single list and ranked from high to low by cumulative four-year dropout rate, percentage of racial/ethnic minority students, and percentage of students from households living below the poverty line.

The rankings for each factor were summed to form a cumulative rank and the nine highest ranking districts were selected. Three of the nine failed to respond to invitations to participate in the project and were replaced by the next three highest ranking districts.

*Collecting the data.* Supporting materials, based on materials used in the REL Northeast and Islands study, included introductory letters to school personnel (appendix C), model commitment letters for district use

(appendix D), interview guides (appendix E), and a template for recording information (appendix F). The template provided lists of response categories for each question, so qualitative data did not have to be coded.

Next, interview questions were developed on programs and policies focusing on dropout prevention, dropout reduction, school completion, and students at a higher risk of dropping out. The NCES event dropout rate was used to define *dropout*: “students of any grade who leave school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent” (Laird, DeBell, and Chapman 2006).

Following an Internet search for preliminary information about local dropout problems and what districts and states were doing to address them, district administrative offices were contacted through exploratory phone calls and emails. The research team explained the project, answered questions, and asked to be connected to the person most directly responsible for dropout prevention efforts.

Respondents received explanatory materials, a model for a commitment letter from the superintendent, and interview consent forms. Respondents agreed to secure district commitment letters, complete consent

forms, and gather information on district dropout prevention programs and policies by consulting their files and those of colleagues. Commitment letters, signed by the superintendent or the superintendent’s designee, were received for each district, and consent forms were received for each respondent.

Respondents then received a template for recording data (see appendix F) several days before scheduled interviews so they could prepare by consulting colleagues or compiling information. Respondents were asked to review the core strategies described in the template to guide them in what programs to report.

The respondent in each district was interviewed by phone for about 15–30 minutes and asked to send additional materials describing the programs.

After each interview, the research team looked for discrepancies and contacted respondents for clarification. Each respondent received a complete data file, confirmed its accuracy, and confirmed that the superintendent or designee authorized its inclusion in the database.

All project data, including written notes and supplemental materials, were stored at Rutgers University, in accordance with the requirements of Rutgers’ Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects.

**What the literature shows**

Two U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences sources guide educators and policymakers seeking effective dropout prevention programs and policies:

- The What Works Clearinghouse evaluates middle school, junior high school, high school, and community-based dropout prevention interventions. As of May 1, 2010, it had rated 17 interventions and found 12 with potentially positive effects (appendix B).

- The *Dropout Prevention Practice Guide* (Dynarski et al. 2008) recommends ways for educators and policymakers to reduce dropout rates. It rates the level of evidence for its six recommendations as strong, moderate, or low:<sup>1</sup>
  - Uses data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and that help identify students at high risk of dropping out (level of evidence: low).
  - Assigns adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out (moderate).
  - Provides academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance (moderate).
  - Implements programs to improve classroom behavior and social skills (low).
  - Personalizes the learning environment and instructional process (moderate).
  - Provides rigorous instruction to engage students in learning and transfer the skills students need to graduate and to succeed after they leave school (moderate).

The literature on the harmful outcomes associated with dropping out is rich. Peer-reviewed articles in Belfield and Levin (2007) report that the earnings of high school dropouts are far less than those of nondropouts (Rouse 2007); female dropouts are far more likely to be on welfare than women with a high school diploma or more (Waldfogel, Garfinkel, and Kelly 2007); high school graduates live 6–9 years longer than high school dropouts and are less likely to become ill or disabled (Muennig 2007); and dropouts are more likely to commit violent crimes and be imprisoned at some point in their lives (Moretti 2007).

Belfield and Levin (2007) argue that increasing high school graduation rates can benefit both

students and society. Rouse (2007) shows that high school graduates contribute far more tax revenue than do high school dropouts. Muenning (2007) estimates that each additional high school graduate could save the government \$39,000 in health care costs (in present value terms) over a lifetime from age 20. Moretti (2007) explains how increasing the number of high school graduates could significantly reduce crime-related costs and add billions in wage dollars to the economy.

The extent of dropout problems can be seen in average freshman graduation rates (the percentage of an entering freshman class that graduates within four years) at both national and state levels. Stillwell (2009) reports a national public school graduation rate of 73.9 percent for 2006–07 by dividing the number of 2006/07 diploma recipients by the average number of 2002/03 grade 8 students, 2003/04 grade 9 students, and 2004/05 grade 10 students. In the Mid-Atlantic Region, as in the United States, Black and Hispanic students (and American Indian students in Maryland and Pennsylvania) have the lowest graduation rates (table 1).

Graduation gaps across gender and racial/ethnic categories can also be seen in status completion rates—the high school graduation status of a particular age group. So Cataldi, Laird, and KewalRamani (2009) calculated the national percentage of 18- through 24-year-olds in 2007 who were not enrolled in high school but who had earned a high school diploma or equivalent credential, such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. They report that:

- Most (89.0 percent) had received a high school diploma or equivalent credential.
- Women had a higher status completion rate (90.6 percent) than men (87.4 percent).

**In the Mid-Atlantic Region, as in the United States, Black and Hispanic students (and American Indian students in Maryland and Pennsylvania) have the lowest graduation rates**

TABLE 1

**Average high school freshman graduation rates in Mid-Atlantic Region jurisdictions, by race/ethnicity, 2006/07**

Race/ethnicity	Delaware	District of Columbia	Maryland	New Jersey	Pennsylvania
All students	71.9	54.9	80.0	84.4	83.0
American Indian	77.1	—	71.6	91.2	64.1
Asian	100.0	—	99.6	100.0	98.7
Hispanic	64.7	—	76.8	74.3	68.4
Black	64.0	—	72.4	72.9	64.6
White	75.8	—	84.3	88.4	87.3

— is not available.

Source: Stillwell 2009.

- Whites (93.5 percent) had a higher status completion rate than Asians (93.1 percent), Blacks (88.8 percent), and Hispanics (72.7 percent).
- Just more than half (56.1 percent) of foreign-born Hispanics had completed high school, compared with 85.9 percent of “first generation” native-born Hispanics and 85.1 percent of “second generation or higher” native-born Hispanics.

Students from some racial/ethnic groups and students from low-income households are at an increased risk of not completing high school. A study of national event dropout rates (the percentage of students ages 15–24 who dropped out of grades 10–12 in public or private schools) between October 2006 and October 2007 found the dropout rate for White students to be 2.2 percent, compared with 7.5 percent for Asian students, 6.0 percent for Hispanic students, and 4.5 percent for Black students. Students from households with incomes in the bottom 20 percent of the sample had a dropout rate of 8.8 percent; students from households with incomes in the top 20 percent had a dropout rate of 0.9 percent (Cataldi et al. 2009).

A key to reducing dropout rates is understanding why students leave school before graduating—by identifying factors that are highly

correlated with dropping out. Neild and Balfanz (2006) found that for on-time grade 10 students (those who have not repeated a grade), risk factors included scoring low in reading, having attendance below 80 percent, earning fewer than five credits, having a baby during the year, and experiencing an out-of-home juvenile justice placement during the year.

Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) sought dropouts’ opinions about why they left high school without graduating. They reported that 69 percent of dropouts said that they were not motivated or inspired to work hard; 47 percent said a major reason was that their classes were not interesting; 45 percent said they started high school poorly prepared; 35 percent said they were “failing in school”; 32 percent cited personal reasons, such as needing to get a job, becoming a parent, or having to care for a family member; and 29 percent expressed doubts that they could have met their school’s requirements for graduation.

**Participating Mid-Atlantic Region districts reported a wide range of dropout prevention programs, but only one has been reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse**

## FINDINGS

The findings draw on district respondents’ views of what constitutes a dropout prevention program, as shaped by the materials sent by the research team before the interviews. Participating Mid-Atlantic Region districts reported a wide range of dropout prevention programs, but only one has been reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse.

### What are the characteristics of dropout prevention programs and policies in the nine districts?

Each participating district reported 5–11 dropout prevention programs, for a total of 58 programs across the nine districts. No district reported dropout prevention policies apart from those establishing the reported programs. And only once did two districts report using the same program model—Education Leading to Employment and Career Training. But how the two districts implemented this program—one as a state-funded program involving seven categories of staff and collaboration with a community health clinic and the other as a privately funded program involving only guidance counselors—was so different that the programs are treated as distinct in this report.

*Core strategies.* The most common core strategies identified by respondents were advocating for

student needs (64 percent of programs), engaging and supporting families (57 percent), and monitoring attendance (53 percent; table 2).

*Service goals.* The most common service goals (the means by which the program seeks to help students stay in school, progress in school, or complete school)<sup>2</sup> reported were to improve academic performance (95 percent of programs), decrease truancy (66 percent), and provide support during transitions (60 percent; table 3).

*Targeted student subgroups.* Students with academic needs was the most commonly targeted student subgroup—a focus of 90 percent of programs (table 4). Other subgroups targeted by 50 percent or more of programs were students from low socioeconomic status families (60 percent), special needs students with behavioral challenges (57 percent), and students who are chronically truant or absent (53 percent).

TABLE 2

#### Core strategies of 58 dropout prevention programs in nine Mid-Atlantic Region school districts, 2008

Core strategy	Number	Percent
Advocating for student needs	37	64
Engaging and supporting families	33	57
Monitoring attendance	31	53
Mentoring	25	43
Transforming the school environment	22	38
Case management/service coordination	21	36
Community collaboration	20	34
Career education and workforce readiness	20	34
Social and emotional transition support	18	31
Accelerated credit accumulation	18	31
Tutoring/extra classes	17	29
Individualized or culturally/linguistically relevant instruction	16	28
Instructional technologies	15	26
Systemic/policy renewal	14	24
Out-of-school enhancement	13	22
Social and emotional learning curricula	9	16
Professional development	4	7
Enhancing English language proficiency	1	2

Note: A program can employ more than one strategy.

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from district reports of core strategies.

TABLE 3

**Service goals of 58 dropout prevention programs in nine Mid-Atlantic Region school districts, 2008**

Service goal	Programs	
	Number	Percent
Improve academic performance	55	95
Decrease truancy	38	66
Provide support during transitions	35	60
Increase school attachment	34	59
Address behavioral challenges	29	50
Promote college planning and linkages	27	47
Provide career planning and preparation	27	47
Provide mental health support	19	33
Address school safety and environment	17	29

Note: A program can have more than one service goal.

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from district reports of service goals.

TABLE 4

**Student subgroups targeted by 58 dropout prevention programs in nine Mid-Atlantic Region school districts, 2008**

Subgroup	Programs	
	Number	Percent
Students with academic needs	52	90
Students from low socioeconomic status families	35	60
Special needs students with behavioral challenges	33	57
Students who are chronically truant or absent	31	53
Special needs students with learning disabilities	22	38
Special needs students with mental health needs	22	38
Pregnant teens/teen mothers	21	36
English language learner students	20	34
Students who would be the first in their family to attend college	18	31
Students returning from incarceration	16	28

Note: A program may have more than one target subgroup.

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from district reports of student subgroups targeted.

**Targeted grade levels.** Of the 58 reported dropout prevention programs, 48 targeted multiple grades: 12 focused on grades 9–12; 12 on grades 6–12; 5 on grades 7–12; 5 on grades 6–8; and 5 on grades 11–12. By contrast, only 10 programs focused on students in a single grade: 5 on grade 9; 3 on grade 12; and 1 each on grades 8 and 11 (table 5).

**District staff involvement.** Programs involved a wide variety of staff. The most common were

teachers (86 percent of programs), guidance counselors (78 percent), and principals or other administrators (67 percent; table 6).

**Community involvement.** Parent involvement was the most commonly reported form of community involvement; community agency staff played some role in many programs (table 7). The most common community agencies involved were departments of youth or social services (28 percent),

TABLE 5  
**Grades targeted by 58 dropout prevention programs in nine Mid-Atlantic Region school districts, 2008**

Grade	Exclusively on grade	Partially on grade
6	0	17
7	0	24
8	1	27
9	5	35
10	0	34
11	1	38
12	3	37

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from district reports of grades targeted.

TABLE 7  
**Community involvement in 58 dropout prevention programs in nine Mid-Atlantic Region school districts, 2008**

Position	Programs	
	Number	Percent
Parents	40	69
Departments of youth/social services	16	28
Mental health services	16	28
Police	13	22
Mentoring program	12	21
Truancy court	11	19
Local higher education	10	17
Tutors	8	14
Health clinic	6	10
Religious affiliate	5	9
Other volunteers	5	9
AmeriCorps members	4	7
Corporations	3	5
Community-based organization	1	2
No reported community involvement	12	21

Note: A program may have more than one type of community involvement.

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from district reports of community involvement.

mental health services (28 percent), police (22 percent), and mentoring programs (21 percent).

TABLE 6  
**District staff involvement in 58 dropout prevention programs in nine Mid-Atlantic Region school districts, 2008**

Position	Programs	
	Number	Percent
Teacher	50	86
Guidance counselor	45	78
Principal/administrator	39	67
Special education staff	26	45
School nurse	20	34
Truancy/attendance officer	19	33
Paraprofessional	15	26
Psychologist/therapist	15	26
Social worker	15	26
Parent-community liaison	14	24
Adjustment counselor	11	19
Entire school staff	10	17
Crisis counselor	8	14
Dropout specialist	8	14
Tutor	7	12
Director	7	12
Resource officer	7	12
Security guard	6	10
Day care provider	5	9
Support specialist	5	9
Student advocate	4	7
Behavioral resource office staff	4	7
Grant writer	2	3
Grant manager	1	2
Nutrition counselor	1	2

Note: A program may involve more than one type of staff. In some cases, districts indicated degrees of involvement by reporting both individual staff who had major involvement and "entire school staff" to indicate that all staff had some involvement.

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from district reports of staff involvement.

Twelve programs (21 percent) reported no community involvement.

*Funding sources.* Districts funded all or part of 79 percent of programs; state governments were the most common providers of outside funds (41 percent of programs); and no funding sources were reported for four programs (7 percent; table 8).

TABLE 8

**Funding sources for 58 dropout prevention programs in nine Mid-Atlantic Region school districts, 2008**

Funding source	Programs	
	Number	Percent
District	46	79
State	24	41
Federal	15	26
Private	4	7
None reported	4	7

*Note:* A program may have more than one funding source; includes partial or full funding.

*Source:* Authors' analysis based on data from district reports of funding sources.

**Which programs have been reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse, and what were its findings?**

As of May 1, 2010, the What Works Clearinghouse website ([www.whatworks.ed.gov](http://www.whatworks.ed.gov)) had reported on the effectiveness of 17 dropout prevention interventions, based on reviews of studies meeting its standards (see appendix B).<sup>3</sup>

Only one of these interventions—Talent Development High Schools—had been implemented by a sample Mid-Atlantic Region district at the time of the study. The What Works Clearinghouse (2007, p. 1) describes Talent Development High Schools as:

A school reform model for restructuring large high schools with persistent attendance and discipline problems, poor student achievement, and high dropout rates. The model includes both structural and curriculum reforms. It calls for schools to reorganize into small “learning communities”—including ninth-grade academies for first-year students and career academies for students in upper grades—to reduce student isolation and anonymity. It also emphasizes high academic standards and provides all students with a college-preparatory academic sequence.

Talent Development High Schools had “potentially positive effects on progressing in school,” as measured by credit accumulation, grade promotion, or highest grade completed. But the amount of evidence was “small” and “no studies [of the model] that met the [What Works Clearinghouse] evidence standards . . . addressed staying in school or completing school” (What Works Clearinghouse 2007, p. 1).

**ADDING TO THE REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY NORTHEAST AND ISLANDS DATABASE**

Data from this study were integrated into the REL Northeast and Islands database of dropout prevention programs. The database documents local use of dropout prevention programs and indicates which of the reported programs have been reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse. It enables school administrators to identify districts with programs like their own, programs targeting specific student groups, and programs employing core strategies they might want to investigate. The database provides information that could lead to district collaboration in grant seeking or on joint programs with institutions of higher education and other regional institutions and agencies. It will be updated and expanded periodically and can be accessed at [www.relnei.org/research/educational\\_dropoutdb.php](http://www.relnei.org/research/educational_dropoutdb.php). See box 2 for a basic guide to using the database and appendix A in Myint-U et al. (2008, revised 2009) for the complete users guide.

This database is maintained by Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northeast and Islands or its designee, but other regional educational laboratories, states, and organizations may be authorized to add data, as appropriate. REL Northeast and Islands or its designee also makes any decisions on updating database fields. REL Northeast and Islands and REL Mid-Atlantic are discussing plans for collaborative efforts to update and expand the database, including the addition of data from larger districts and urban districts with lower

## BOX 2

**Using the dropout prevention database**

The database is located at [www.renei.org/research.educational.dropoutdb.php](http://www.renei.org/research.educational.dropoutdb.php).

*Design.* The database is divided into four linked page layouts:

- *Program or Policy Details* overviews each program or policy in the database, including service goals, core strategies, staffing, and whether the program is reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse.
- *District Details* overviews each participating district and lists the programs and policies it was implementing in the year reported.
- *School Details* overviews each school in participating districts and lists the programs and policies it was implementing in the year reported; only schools that were implementing one or more

programs are included in the database.

- *Programs List View Read-Only* lists all the districts and programs in the database.

*Navigating.* When you log in, you will see the Program or Policy Details page. To move to a different page layout, use the Layout pull-down menu in the left navigation bar. To move to another record within a page layout, click on Previous or Next in the top right corner of the page. On the Program List View Read-Only page, arrows on the notebook icon in the left navigation bar let you scroll through the entire list, 25 records at a time. Click the arrows to the left of “District” to sort districts in ascending or descending order or the arrows to the left of “Program Name” to sort program names in ascending or descending order.

*Searching.* Searches using customized criteria can be conducted in all four page layouts. To search for records meeting specific criteria on the Program or Policy Details page, select

Show All Records (the eye icon under Browse in the left navigation bar) and then the Find button (the blue circle with a magnifying glass at the top middle of the page). This opens a blank Program or Policy Details form. To search by program name, enter all or some of the program name into the Name field and click Perform Find on the left navigation bar. To search by criteria, select one or more criteria for which you would like to find a matching program or policy and click Perform Find. To search for programs reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse, for example, select Yes in that field and click Perform Find. The database will find all records that match your selected criteria. To see matching programs in list view, select Program List View under Layout. To go back to accessing all records, select Show All Records. The District Details and School Details pages can be searched in a similar fashion.

For detailed instructions about all aspects of the database, see appendix A of Myint-U et al. (2008, revised 2009) at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?ProjectID=37>.

dropout rates. They are also investigating how the strategies identified in the *Dropout Prevention Practice Guide* (Dynarski et al. 2008) can inform future data collection and reporting.

comprehensive data about dropout prevention programs in the nine districts:

- Identifying staff most directly responsible for dropout prevention.
- Providing them with all questions in advance.
- Interviewing them carefully.
- Examining their responses for internal consistency and agreement with data obtained from other sources.

**STUDY LIMITATIONS**

This study has several limitations. The completeness and accuracy of the data depend on the diligence of key respondents. Several measures involving district staff were designed to increase the likelihood that the study would yield

- Recontacting them to probe for missing or inconsistent data.
- Securing their assurance that collected data were accurate.

Nevertheless, it is possible that interviews of other staff would have produced different data.

Not all districts had a strict definition of dropout program. The list of core strategies provided to respondents was intended to encourage reporting of all programs that could reasonably be considered to have dropout prevention as their aim. Still, some districts may have reported programs that other districts would not have characterized as dropout prevention programs. (For example, one district might consider a safe schools program a component of its dropout prevention efforts, while another district might not.)

Some district respondents did not report all of the information sought about their programs. For example, implementation costs were not reported for 20 programs, demographic data for 6 programs, and funding information for 4 programs.

Because the research team used the National Center for Education Statistics definition of mid-size city, no Maryland or District of Columbia school district was included in the study and large districts were excluded.

By focusing on districts with the highest dropout rates, the study excluded socioeconomically similar districts with lower dropout rates, whose dropout prevention programs could be of considerable interest.

## APPENDIX A STUDY METHODOLOGY

This report replicated the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northeast and Islands study in sample selection and data collection.

### Selecting the sample

To add comparable data to the REL Northeast and Islands database, this study focused on school districts serving mid-size cities, so that “staff would be able to collect comprehensive information on programs and policies implemented within the whole district, rather than just in individual schools” (Myint-U et al. 2008, revised 2009, p. 5). Thus, the largest districts were excluded from data collection.

First, a list of districts serving mid-size cities in each Mid-Atlantic state was compiled using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) definition of mid-size city as a “central city” of a metropolitan area “having a population less than 250,000” (National Center for Education Statistics

2008, p. D-1).<sup>4</sup> No Maryland or District of Columbia school districts served cities that met this definition.

Next, the districts were merged into a single list and ranked from high to low by cumulative four-year dropout rates (the percentage of students who were enrolled in grade 9 but did not graduate four years later), percentage of racial/ethnic minority students, and percentage of students from households living below the poverty line. Districts that ranked below 18 in any factor were excluded to concentrate on districts with the greatest challenges.

The rankings for each factor were then summed to form a cumulative rank, and the nine highest ranking districts were selected. Three of the nine failed to respond to invitations to participate in the project and were replaced by the three next highest ranking districts. The nine participating districts served communities with populations of 24,742–107,250 (as of July 2008). Because the selection process focused on districts with specific demographic characteristics, it might not be representative of all districts in the Mid-Atlantic

TABLE A1

### Key characteristics of participating Mid-Atlantic Region school districts, 2008

State	District	National Center for Education Statistics district locale code (post-2006) <sup>a</sup>	Percentage of racial/ethnic minority students (2005/06)	Percentage of students in grade 9 in 2003/04 who did not graduate in 2006/07	Percentage of students from households with low socioeconomic status (2004)
Delaware	Capital (Dover)	City: Small	58	49	17
New Jersey	Bridgeton	Town: Fringe	87	37	25
Pennsylvania	Allentown City	City: Midsize	76	38	29
Pennsylvania	Harrisburg City	City: Small	95	45	34
Pennsylvania	Lancaster	City: Small	79	35	28
Pennsylvania	Lebanon	City: Small	49	37	26
Pennsylvania	Reading	City: Small	85	53	38
Pennsylvania	Williamsport Area	City: Small	27	31	21
Pennsylvania	York City	City: Small	80	41	40

a. All districts were categorized as mid-size cities in the pre-2006 locale code system.

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from U.S. Department of Education (2007a, 2007b, and 2009); [www.doe.k12.de.us/reports\\_data/enrollment/default.shtml](http://www.doe.k12.de.us/reports_data/enrollment/default.shtml); [www.doe.k12.de.us/reports\\_data/gradrate/default.shtml](http://www.doe.k12.de.us/reports_data/gradrate/default.shtml); [www.state.nj.us/education/data/](http://www.state.nj.us/education/data/); and [www.education.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/data\\_and\\_statistics/7202](http://www.education.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/data_and_statistics/7202).

Region or of any jurisdiction in the Mid-Atlantic Region. Table A1 displays key characteristics of the districts.

### Collecting the data

Supporting materials, based on materials used in the REL Northeast and Islands study, included introductory letters to school personnel (appendix C), model commitment letters for district use (appendix D) interview guides (appendix E), and a template for recording information (appendix F).<sup>5</sup> The template was developed directly from the REL Northeast and Islands database fields to ensure that Mid-Atlantic Region data could be integrated. It provided respondents with lists of response categories for each question, so qualitative data did not have to be coded.

Next, interview questions were developed on programs and policies focusing on dropout prevention, dropout reduction, school completion, and students at a higher risk of dropping out, such as pregnant teens, students who are old for their grade, and students with emotional or behavioral challenges (Dynarski and Gleason 2002; Neild and Balfanz 2006; Osher, Morrison, and Bailey 2003; Rumberger 2001). The NCES event dropout rate was used to define *dropout*: “students of any grade who leave school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent” (Laird, DeBell, and Chapman 2006).

Before contacting the districts, an Internet search was conducted focusing on school districts, state departments of education, local media, and community-based organizations (such as the Spanish American Civic Association of Lancaster or the Olivet Boys and Girls Club of Reading and Berks County). These sources provided preliminary information about local dropout problems and what districts and states were doing to address them. The information, used to build knowledge about local conditions, facilitated discussion with district staff.

Initial contact was made in phone calls and emails to district administrative offices. The research team explained the project, answered questions, and asked to be connected to the person most directly responsible for dropout prevention efforts. In one district, for example, this staff member was the coordinator of counseling and dropout prevention programs, in another, the executive director of community and student services, and in a third, the principal.

Respondents received explanatory materials, a model for a commitment letter from the superintendent, and interview consent forms. The model commitment letter (see appendix D) stipulated that only descriptive information would be collected, that the superintendent or a designee could review the information and delete anything considered inappropriate for inclusion, and that neither database nor publication would identify any district staff. Respondents agreed to secure district commitment letters, complete consent forms, and gather information on district dropout prevention programs and policies by consulting their files and those of colleagues. Commitment letters, signed by the superintendent or a designee, were received for each district, and consent forms were received for each respondent.

Respondents then received a template for recording data (see appendix F) several days before scheduled interviews so they could review the questions and prepare by consulting colleagues or compiling information. Respondents were asked to review the core strategies described in the template to guide them on what programs to report.

Each respondent was interviewed by phone for about 15–30 minutes and asked to send additional materials describing the programs.

After each interview, the research team looked for discrepancies (contradictions involving funding, numbers of students served, program start and end dates), in interview data, written materials,

and data obtained from websites and contacted respondents for clarification. Twice where respondents failed to report programs mentioned on websites, the research team probed for additional information; in both cases, respondents reported that the websites were out of date. Finally, each respondent received a complete data file to confirm its accuracy and verify that the superintendent or a designee had authorized its inclusion in the database.

All project data, including written notes and supplemental materials, were stored at Rutgers University, in accordance with the requirements of Rutgers' Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects.

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### Adding to the database

Data from this study were entered into a blank copy of the REL Northeast and Islands database of dropout prevention programs. This copy was then forwarded to REL Northeast and Islands for integration into a combined database titled Database of Dropout Prevention Programs in Selected Low-Income School Districts in the Northeast and Islands Region and the Mid-Atlantic Region. The database is maintained by REL Northeast and Islands or its designee, but other regional educational laboratories, states, and organizations may be authorized to add data, as appropriate. REL Northeast and Islands makes any decisions on updating database fields. The database is updated and expanded periodically.

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**APPENDIX B**  
**DROPOUT PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS**  
**EVALUATED BY THE WHAT WORKS**  
**CLEARINGHOUSE (AS OF MAY 1, 2010)**

What Works Clearinghouse reviews of dropout interventions focus on three outcome domains: staying in school, progressing in school, and completing school. Interventions are assigned to one of six categories for each domain:

- *Positive effect.* Strong evidence of a positive effect with no overriding contrary evidence.
- *Potentially positive effect.* Evidence of a positive effect with no overriding contrary evidence.
- *Mixed effect.* Evidence of inconsistent effects.
- *No discernible effect.* No affirmative evidence of an effect.
- *Potentially negative effect.* Evidence of a negative effect with no overriding contrary evidence.
- *Negative effect.* Strong evidence of a negative effect with no overriding contrary evidence.

Interventions with positive or potentially positive effects on two domains were:

- Accelerated Middle Schools: staying in school (potentially positive) and progressing in school (positive).
- ALAS (Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success): staying in school and progressing in school (potentially positive).
- Career Academies: staying in school and progressing in school (potentially positive).

- Check & Connect: staying in school (positive) and progressing in school (potentially positive).

Interventions with potentially positive effects on one domain were:

- Financial Incentives for Teen Parents to Stay in School: staying in school.
- High School Redirection: progressing in school.
- Job Corps: completing school.
- JOBSTART: completing school.
- New Chance: completing school.
- Talent Development High Schools: progressing in school.
- Talent Search: completing school.
- Twelve Together: staying in school.

Interventions with no discernible effects on any domain were:

- First Things First
- Middle College High School
- Project Grad
- Quantum Opportunity Program
- Summer Training and Education Program (STEP)

None of the identified programs was found to have mixed effects, a potentially negative effect, or a negative effect.

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**APPENDIX C**  
**INTRODUCTORY LETTER**

Dear [Superintendent]:

The Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences, is helping to build a database of current dropout prevention policies and programs that target urban students throughout the country (see enclosed news release about the project's initial phase, concentrating on New England districts). This database is intended to (1) support collaboration across districts involving promising dropout prevention strategies and (2) document local efforts to use evidence-based programs and strategies, such as those identified by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse.

We plan to collect information this year on nine mid-size city school districts in our region. Your district was chosen as one of the initial participants because of its size, the diversity of its student population, and your presumed interest in addressing dropout issues.

We hope to acquire necessary information in brief telephone interviews (15 to 30 minutes) with you or other staff you may recommend. To minimize your time investment, we will first search the Web for publicly available information on dropout programs in your district and send our questions to you in advance.

Information collected will be at the district level and will not include any personal information. When we have finished collecting information from your district, we will submit it to you for review and will delete any data that you don't want to include in the database.

Within a few days, we will telephone you to answer any questions you may have about the project and to schedule a convenient time for you to participate in a brief telephone interview.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Bausmith, Ph.D.  
Co-Principal Investigator  
Rutgers University

Encl: REL-NEI news release

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**APPENDIX D**  
**MODEL COMMITMENT LETTER**

Jennifer Bausmith, Ph.D.  
Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic  
Center for Effective School Practices  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
80 Cottontail Lane  
Somerset, NJ 08873

Dear Dr. Bausmith:

This letter serves as a commitment for our district to collaborate with the Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic in a study of dropout prevention programs in the region.

I understand that the intent of the study is to develop a database providing useful and relevant information for this district and other mid-sized urban school districts nationally. The research team will also produce a short publication summarizing the methods and findings of the study.

I also understand that:

- The study will take the form of brief telephone interviews with key district personnel, who will receive a complete list of questions in advance;
- Information collected will be restricted to descriptive information about district dropout programs;
- I will have an opportunity to review all information collected by the researchers and delete anything I think should not be included in the database; and
- Neither database nor publication will identify any interviewees.

Sincerely,

## APPENDIX E INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Introduce the purpose of the phone interview:  
“Thank you for agreeing to speak with me about the kinds of dropout prevention policies and programs that are being utilized in the [name of school district] school district. The purpose of this project is to collect information on how schools in the Mid-Atlantic Region are addressing the issue of high school dropout.

Before we start, do you have any questions I can answer?”

2. Ask for a district-level letter of commitment and a signed consent form from the interviewee. State that the information will be used at the district level with no personal information collected or reported. The data will be used for writing final reports and

for populating the existing database developed by Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands. State that the interview process should not take more than 60 minutes of their time.

3. Conduct the interview—referring to the interviewer template for recording data. For each program mentioned, try to get answers to every question on the template to enter into the project data file.
4. Request written materials (by mail, fax, or email) that may be available on those dropout prevention programs and policies mentioned and that can help get information for the database.
5. Once the interview is complete, request contact information for the appropriate individual in the district who can review the completed data files to ensure accuracy of data entered.

## APPENDIX F INTERVIEW TEMPLATE FOR RECORDING DATA

*What are the district's 2008/09 student demographics?*

Student population: \_\_\_\_\_

% limited English proficient: \_\_\_\_\_

% free or reduced-price lunch: \_\_\_\_\_

Student ethnicity:

% Asian \_\_\_\_\_

% Black \_\_\_\_\_

% Latino \_\_\_\_\_

% Native American \_\_\_\_\_

% White \_\_\_\_\_

% Other \_\_\_\_\_

*Program/policy title:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Names of schools implementing the program/policy*

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Brief description (1–3 sentences on program/policy and target population; include website address, if applicable)* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Target grades (circle all that apply)*

6 7 8 9 10 11 12

*Number of participants*

2009/10 \_\_\_\_\_

2008/09 \_\_\_\_\_

2007/08 \_\_\_\_\_

*Intervention level (check all that apply)*

- Entire student population
- Students considered at risk because they belong to some subset of the school population
- Students considered at risk because of individual performance or behaviors

*Target populations (check all that apply)*

- Students with academic needs
- Students with limited English proficiency
- Students who would be part of the first generation in their family to attend college
- Students in low socioeconomic status families
- Students who are pregnant or mothers
- Students returning from incarceration
- Special needs students with behavioral challenges
- Special needs students with learning disabilities
- Special needs students with mental health needs
- Students who are chronically truant or absent

*Demographics of participants*

% Male \_\_\_\_\_

% Female \_\_\_\_\_

% Asian \_\_\_\_\_

% Black \_\_\_\_\_

% Latino \_\_\_\_\_

% Native American \_\_\_\_\_

% White \_\_\_\_\_

*Project/policy goals (check all that apply)*

- Address behavioral needs
- Address school safety and environment
- Decrease truancy
- Improve academic performance
- Increase school attachment
- Promote college planning and linkages
- Provide career planning and preparation
- Provide mental health support
- Provide support during transitions

*Core strategies (check all that apply)*

Strategy	Description
<input type="checkbox"/> Accelerated credit accumulation	Provides students with opportunities to fulfill credits in an expedited way so they can “catch up” with their same-age peers.
<input type="checkbox"/> Advocating for student needs	Encourages program staff to communicate with school officials or key personnel about students’ needs and ways to address them.
<input type="checkbox"/> Career education and workforce readiness	Introduces and exposes students to different types of careers and/or provides skills for entering the workforce.
<input type="checkbox"/> Case management/service coordination	Provides students or families who require multiple services with coordinated care throughout the service delivery process.
<input type="checkbox"/> Community collaboration	Works with various community agencies and individuals to increase school-community collaboration and to link students to services.
<input type="checkbox"/> Engaging and supporting families	Involves parents, guardians, and other family members in program activities; provides support to families to help them address issues that may facilitate dropout.
<input type="checkbox"/> Individualized or culturally/linguistically relevant instruction	Customizes instruction to match students’ needs and abilities and recognizes and incorporates cultural and linguistic diversity of students.
<input type="checkbox"/> Instructional technologies	Uses innovative new technologies, such as teacher-supported computer-based learning, to increase student motivation.
<input type="checkbox"/> Mentoring	Matches students with adult mentors in an effort to establish a close, supportive one-on-one relationship.
<input type="checkbox"/> Monitoring attendance	Uses tools or strategies to help schools more closely monitor whether a student is in school and to contact parents/guardians to let them know their child is absent.
<input type="checkbox"/> Out-of-school enrichment	Provides students with after-school, Saturday, and summer enrichment programs.
<input type="checkbox"/> Professional development	Provides opportunities for teaching staff to gain skills they can use in and outside the classroom to enrich their own experiences and the experiences of their students.
<input type="checkbox"/> Social and emotional learning curricula	Uses curricula in classrooms to help students develop social and emotional learning skills (e.g., conflict resolution) to deal with issues that may place them at risk for dropping out.
<input type="checkbox"/> Social and emotional transition support	Focuses on providing support to students who are in “transition” periods (e.g., transition from middle to high school, pregnancy, returning from incarceration, newly immigrated, parenthood); also includes provision of support to students with mental health needs.
<input type="checkbox"/> Systemic/policy renewal	Focuses on creating a new or renewed coordinated district-level policy related to dropout prevention that will address most current issues and risks.
<input type="checkbox"/> Transforming the school environment	Strives to create an overall school environment that is caring, safe, and emotionally supportive and in which students feel safe and a sense of respect and self-worth; may include smaller communities.
<input type="checkbox"/> Tutoring/extra classes	Provides students with extra academic support for subject matters in which they are not excelling or are failing.

*In-school staff involvement (check all that apply)*

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Adjustment counselor       | <input type="checkbox"/> Dropout specialist       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioral resource office | <input type="checkbox"/> Grant writer             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crisis counselor           | <input type="checkbox"/> Guidance counselor       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daycare providers          | <input type="checkbox"/> Nutrition counselor      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Director                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Paraprofessional         |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> Parent-community liaison |

- Principal/administrator
- Psychologist/therapist
- Resource officer
- School nurse
- Schoolwide
- Security guard
- Social worker
- Special education staff
- Support specialist
- Student advocate
- Teacher
- Truancy/attendance officer
- Tutor

- Truancy court
- Tutor
- Other volunteer

*Funding sources (check all that apply)*

- District
- State
- Federal
- Private

*Approximate cost to implement in 2008/09:*

\_\_\_\_\_

*Start date:* \_\_\_\_\_

*End date (if applicable):* \_\_\_\_\_

*Reason for discontinuation (if applicable):* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Notes re: discontinuation (if applicable):* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Out-of-school staff involvement (check all that apply)*

- Americorps
- CBO [Community-based organization]
- Corporate
- Department of youth services or social services
- Health clinic
- Job Corps
- Local higher education
- Mental health services
- Mentoring program
- Parents
- Police
- Religious affiliates

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**NOTES**

The authors are indebted to staff of Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands, particularly Athi Myint-U, for sharing research protocols and advice.

1. “*Strong* refers to consistent and generalizable evidence that a dropout prevention programs [sic] causes better outcomes. *Moderate* refers either to evidence from studies that allow strong causal conclusions but cannot be generalized with assurance to the population on which a recommendation is focused (perhaps because the findings have not been widely replicated) or to evidence from studies that are generalizable but have more causal ambiguity than offered by experimental designs (e.g., statistical models of correlational data or group comparison designs for which equivalence of the groups at pretest is uncertain). *Low* refers to expert opinion based on reasonable extrapolations from research and theory on other topics and evidence from studies that do not meet the standards for moderate or strong evidence.” (Dynarski et al. 2008, pp. 1, 3).
2. The research team’s list of service goals was developed by REL Northeast and Islands staff, who made a master list of goals identified in programs reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse and in the research literature (Bridgeland et al. 2006; Dynarski and Gleason 2002; Neild and Balfanz 2006; Rumberger 2001). They then consolidated goals where there was overlap (for example, consolidating “increasing school attachment through family support” and “increasing student attachment through mentoring” into the service goal “increasing school attachment”) and submitted their consolidated list to expert reviewers who confirmed its face validity.
3. What Works Clearinghouse reviews are restricted to programs that have been the subject of studies that meet high evidence standards; the fact that an intervention lacks such studies is not an indication that it is ineffective.
4. In March 2006, the NCES changed its system of district locale codes. Seven of the districts selected for the study based on 2004/05 locale codes (the most recent available at the time) were assigned a new categorization of “City: Small;” one changed to “Town: Fringe;” and one retained the designation of “City: Mid-size” (see table A1).
5. The research team confirmed the determination of REL Northeast and Islands researchers that all information to be collected was publicly available on websites or from districts upon request and ensured in introductory and district commitment letters that district administrators would be asked to authorize release of all information before dissemination/publication. These authorizations were attained.

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