



POVERTY, POLITICS, AND A “CIRCLE OF PROMISE”: HOLISTIC EDUCATION POLICY IN BOSTON AND THE CHALLENGE OF INSTITUTIONAL ENTRENCHMENT

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ABSTRACT: *Cash-strapped municipalities throughout the United States are increasingly proposing innovative education policies linking school-based reforms with neighborhood-level interventions. Boston is one such city. In this paper, we describe, analyze, and critique the City of Boston’s “Circle of Promise” initiative, a holistic education policy designed to coordinate school reforms with local community-based organizational resources. We link our discussion of challenges and critiques with the term “institutional entrenchment,” referring to institutional barriers to successful urban policies and the defense of the status quo. We conclude with suggestions for future policy to overcome the impediments of institutional entrenchment, and by extension, improve educational opportunities for students in underperforming urban schools.*

Dubbed “the Harlem Miracle” by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, the Harlem Children’s Zone has sparked considerable discussion in education policy circles. The Zone—a 97-square block section of Harlem—contains a web of interlocking services targeting inner city youth and their families. Beyond violence prevention and prenatal education for expecting mothers, the Zone is perhaps best known for a set of extended-day charter schools serving 7,000 poor minority children with a \$75 million annual budget. The program’s goal is simple, yet novel: attempt to close the racial achievement gap through holistic service delivery and education reform, conceptualizing education inequality as a complex bundle of school and neighborhood-level disadvantages. Tough’s (2008) book *Whatever It Takes* and rigorous empirical research by Harvard economists Dobbie and Fryer (2011) provided clear support for the program. And the Obama administration recently borrowed elements from the Harlem Children’s Zone for the President’s Promise Neighborhoods education initiative.

The fact that the Harlem Children’s Zone is a *privately* run set of initiatives boasting a \$75 million budget has not deterred cash-strapped municipalities from attempts to replicate its

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success. Boston is one such city. In this article, we provide a policy analysis of Boston's Circle of Promise initiative, a neighborhood-based education policy inspired by the Harlem Children's Zone. Based on a combination of publicly available information and our own experiences with the initiative, we describe, analyze, and critique the policy. Like the Harlem Children's Zone and the Federal Promise Neighborhoods initiative, the Circle of Promise attempts to combine youth enrichment with coordinated social service delivery—a holistic approach to closing the achievement gap. We discuss four key challenges to the municipality-lead initiative: (1) limited public funding was available for such an effort, and no private investment was secured; (2) agency fragmentation in government produced tension between policy leadership and accountability; (3) overlapping initiatives in the same geographic area caused malaise, confusion, and redundancy; and (4) citywide busing—a remnant of 1970s-era Boston integration policy—meant neighborhood children do not necessarily attend neighborhood schools.

These challenges are certainly generalizable to other cities with similar institutional structures attempting to create similar policy initiatives. But we also find three critical flaws with Boston's particular approach, namely (1) an emphasis on political messaging overshadowed practical plans of implementation; (2) the initiative's underlying goals changed considerably over time; and (3) a purportedly "data-driven" policy resulted in policymakers only seeking data that confirmed pre-existing assumptions. We link our discussion of challenges and critiques with the term *institutional entrenchment*. We conclude with suggestions for future policy by focusing specifically on the integration of national and local policy options to address problems of institutional entrenchment relating to public education.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND CURRENT STUDY

Holistic education policies—those that attempt to bridge school-based reforms with neighborhood interventions—are rarely the topic of education research. Most research on educational inequality has instead focused on the effects of charter schools, parental choice, or the federal No Child Left Behind Act (Ladd 2012). That is not to say education researchers have ignored the role of social context in contributing to persistent inequality. For example, Sharkey (2009) notes the effect of neighborhood violence on children's cognitive scores. Currie (2009) illustrates the impact of poverty on children's health, and consequently, the effects of poor health on human capital outcomes. More generally, Burdick-Will et al. (2011) suggest neighborhood context matters for educational inequality, though the authors suggest effects may vary across cities. This body of research has prompted scholars such as Ladd (2012) to question policies focused solely on school accountability, as they ignore the impact of poverty and neighborhood context on educational outcomes.

Additional research has pointed to the importance of institutional context in facilitating successful education policies. Stone (2001) argues that cities require high levels of civic capacity to introduce cross-sector, cross-departmental solutions to inequality. Civic capacity, according to Stone, involves "mobilizing various segments of the community to become engaged in considering and acting on a problem in a way that is out of the ordinary" (p. 614). Similarly, Jones, Portz, & Stein (1997) argue that school reforms require broader institutional support from outside actors, such as the business, nonprofit, and community-based sectors. The authors point to institution building and leadership as key challenges to comprehensive education reforms. Taken together, both studies suggest institutional arrangements matter for policy development, and borrowing from Stone (2001), comprehensive education policy requires approaching inequality "in a way that is out of the ordinary."

In this article, we use Boston as a case study to understand how municipalities have attempted to implement holistic education policies. What institutional impediments make replication of "the

Harlem Miracle” difficult? Where might municipalities be misguided in their policy design or implementation? To address these questions, we draw on a mix of publicly available information and personal experiences. Both authors of this article were involved in the early planning stages of Boston’s Circle of Promise initiative. One author worked full time on the initiative for 3 months during the summer of 2010, analyzing the extent of nonprofit service delivery and providing recommendations on general policy design. This author was a true “insider,” attending policymaking meetings as part of an internal team of public officials and local graduate student fellows. Our approach in the present study is to provide a policy analysis of the Circle of Promise, using a critical examination of the initiative to inform our recommendations for future education policy.

THE CIRCLE OF PROMISE

On February 19, 2010, Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino took the podium at the Jeremiah E. Burke High School, one of the worst performing schools in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Flanked at either side by Boston Public Schools Superintendent Carol Johnson and School Committee Chair Rev. Gregory Groover, Menino outlined a plan to address the problems of Boston’s ailing inner city schools. The old way of education reform would not work, he maintained. A new approach was necessary, one that extended beyond the school walls and into the depressed urban communities where students lived. Indeed, 10 of Boston’s 12 chronically underperforming schools are located within a 5 square mile area in the heart of Boston’s inner city. As Menino explained, one could draw a geographic circle around this area and simultaneously include the highest concentrations of poverty, violence, and unemployment in the city. With this realization, the Menino administration launched a geographically targeted, place-based education policy, aptly titled “The Circle of Promise.”

Indeed, the geographic area within the Circle of Promise encompasses the bulk of Boston’s failing schools, violent crime, and neighborhood poverty. Table 1 displays 2011 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) scores for each of the 10 underperforming schools located within the Circle of Promise.¹ Compared to district- and state-wide scores, Circle of Promise schools contain few students scoring in the “Advanced” category, and large proportions of students receiving scores of “Warning/Failing.” Forty-five percent of students at the Dearborn Middle School, for example, received scores in the “Warning/Failing” category for Math. Similarly, 0% of students at Trotter Elementary scored in the “Advanced” category for English, compared to 17% of students throughout the state.

Figure 1 places these 10 underperforming schools within the geographic context of segregation and poverty in Boston. We use data from the 2005 to 2009 American Community Survey 5-year estimates and display the percent Black for each tract normalized by the tract’s median household income. The darkest shaded tracts indicate areas with the highest percentage of African American residents and lowest household income, and the lightest shaded tracts indicate nonblack areas with high household incomes.² The image confirms Mayor Menino’s statement: The Circle of Promise’s boundary clearly includes the intersection of disadvantage in Boston.

The Mayor announced the policy under little fanfare or press, but behind the scenes, numerous agencies throughout city government buzzed with excitement. Senior policymakers in the Mayor’s Office would lead the initiative, but it would be predicated on extensive interagency collaboration; “break down the silos” was a common refrain. Different city agencies attacked different components of inequality—from the Public Health Commission (health) to Thrive in 5 (early education) to the Boston Youth Fund (jobs)—and different private nonprofits throughout the city focused on a variety of issues—from academics to athletics to mentoring. Coordination

TABLE 1

Standardized Test Scores for State, District, and Circle of Promise Schools, 2011

All Schools	% Advanced	% Proficient	% Needs Improvement	% Warning/Failing	No. Students Tested
(3rd–10th Grade)					
English-district	6	41	36	17	26,392
English-state	17	52	23	8	497,258
Math-district	13	26	33	27	26,510
Math-state	24	34	27	15	497,712
Aggasiz (3rd–5th Grade)					
English	1	29	52	17	204
Math	4	34	43	19	204
Dearborn (6th–8th Grade)					
English	1	31	43	25	211
Math	5	19	30	45	207
Kennedy (3rd–5th Grade)					
English	3	32	43	22	173
Math	14	41	32	13	173
Holland (3rd–5th Grade)					
English	0	12	50	37	298
Math	3	19	44	34	303
Orchard Gardens (3rd–8th Grade)					
English	0	30	41	28	444
Math	6	29	32	33	444
Trotter (3rd–5th Grade)					
English	0	20	56	23	124
Math	1	18	47	34	123
Blackstone (3rd–5th Grade)					
English	1	17	44	38	231
Math	1	20	47	32	231
Harbor School (6th–8th Grade)					
English	3	44	41	12	240
Math	3	13	37	48	238
Burke (10th Grade)					
English	1	40	43	16	128
Math	8	25	47	21	130
English (10th Grade)					
English	5	39	39	16	106
Math	17	24	31	27	106

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education.

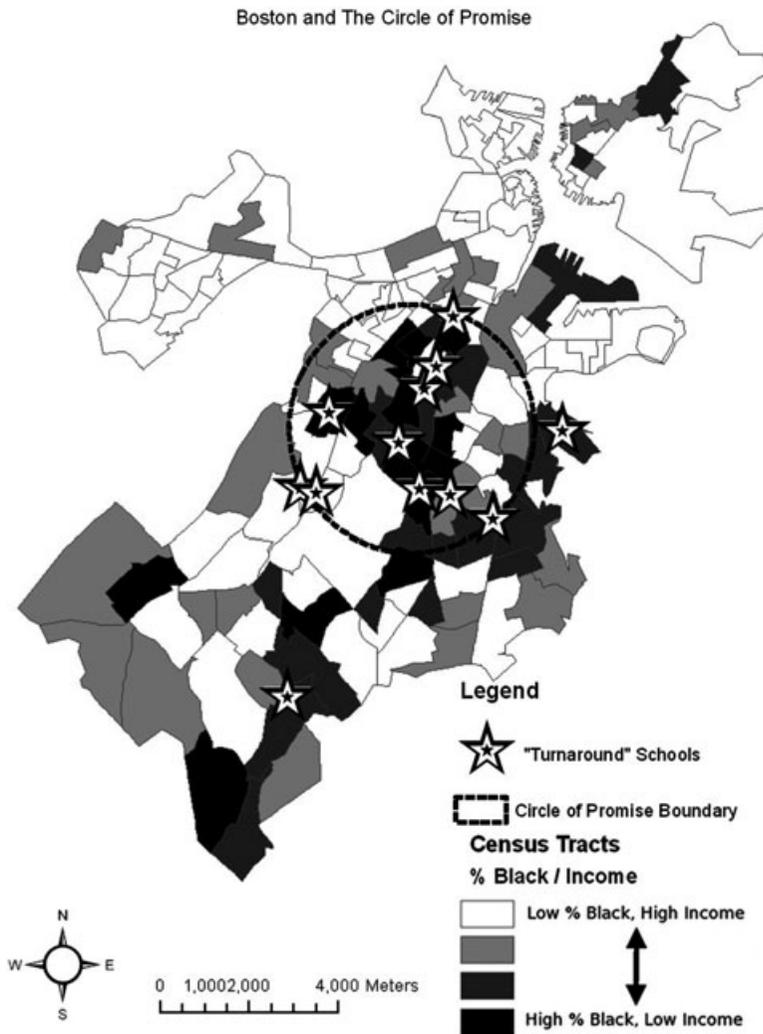


FIGURE 1
Circle of Promise Map

would ensure disadvantaged children traveled through each relevant organization, and individual families received comprehensive access to services.

Policymakers rationalized “coordination” as a push for efficiency through municipal leadership, though “coordination” also served a pragmatic purpose: No additional funding would be allocated for the initiative, making “coordination” the only possible tangible improvement from the status quo. Without external funding, City officials would rely on existing resources, namely, the abundance of nonprofit community-based organizations assumed to be saturated in Boston’s inner city. According to the City’s website for the Circle of Promise:

Boston has a wealth of community-based agencies, faith-based institutions, colleges and universities, and strong public and private sector organizations that offer a multitude of services and programs for families. Yet these services are not fully coordinated, and families must navigate a complicated network with little support. The City of Boston’s Circle of Promise...provides

educational and advocacy services to facilitate seamless access to these opportunities. (Circle of Promise: An Overview, 2011)

For 5 months following the Mayor's initial announcement, leadership for the Circle of Promise fell within the interagency Education, Health, and Human Services Sub-Cabinet. During the summer of 2010, however, the Office of Intergovernmental Relations assumed formal leadership under the direction of former State Representative Marie St. Fleur. A reformulation of the initiative's goals followed soon thereafter. Education achievement, while still an anchor and motivating goal, was subsumed under a broader antipoverty and "wealth creation" agenda. Accepting the validity of neighborhood-level barriers to educational equity—indeed, the very premise of holistic education policy—facilitated the transition to a larger antipoverty message.

On June 23, 2011, nearly 18 months after Mayor Menino's original presentation, the City hosted a ribbon cutting ceremony for the Circle of Promise at the Vine Street Community Center in the inner city neighborhood of Roxbury. The City co-sponsored the event with LIFT-Boston, a newly formed branch of a national antipoverty nonprofit. LIFT, the City revealed, would be the primary partner for the initiative. While City officials previously cited an abundance of preexisting organizational resources within the Circle of Promise, LIFT was a relative newcomer to Boston, opening its Roxbury branch in February of 2011. LIFT trains local college students to provide one-on-one assistance to poor families, connecting them to housing, employment, and educational resources. In addition to their partnership with LIFT-Boston, the Mayor's Office assigned 12 City officials to underperforming schools within the Circle, similarly acting as intermediaries between children, parents, and social services. The private nonprofit organization and liaisons placed within the underperforming schools facilitate a system of referrals to existing social service providers in Boston.

Since the summer of 2010, a number of actions have occurred under the Circle of Promise umbrella. These efforts include an information session for summer youth opportunities, a family resource fair, a phone drive to place youth in free summer camps or programs, and a coat drive during the winter to provide warm clothing to poor families. Yet the goal of a sophisticated, holistic service delivery mechanism has not been achieved. The remainder of our article addresses the institutional challenges and bureaucratic shortcomings of the Circle of Promise initiative.

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

New Policy, No New Investment

No matter how carefully planned, or how persuasively framed, Boston's Circle of Promise faced formidable institutional and political challenges. Principal among these challenges was the lack of federal and state funding for municipal projects. Indeed, the federal contribution to city budgets was 17.5% in 1977; by 2000 it had dropped to 5.4% (Wallin 2005). In Boston, state aid has declined by \$208 million since 2001. In the specific areas of early interventions and Head Start, state funding was reduced by 37% and 25%, respectively, between fiscal year 2009 and 2012 (Kahn and Martin, 2011). With limited support from Washington and reduced state funding, cash-poor municipalities are in a tough position to stay financially solvent, let alone propose an entirely new policy of comprehensive service provision.

Compared to the \$75 million annual budget for the Harlem Children's Zone, plans for Boston's Circle of Promise did not include outside investment, or even a reallocation of public monies. Of course, policymakers would attend countless planning meetings and sessions to design the policy, representing an indirect financial investment on behalf of city government. Yet the running

assumption, rationalized again and again at meeting after meeting, was that existing nonprofit organizations were already excessively funded. Why invest more money, they reasoned, when existing support wasn’t producing any positive outcomes? Moreover, why propose an entirely top-down initiative when, presumably, countless nonprofit organizations were already funded from grant-awarding foundations to close the achievement gap?

Boston responded to limited federal and state funding by emphasizing the need to streamline existing resources. If nonprofit organizations are bountiful, and external actors like charitable foundations are already providing funding, the problem of education achievement could not be financial. Instead, policymakers reasoned, the problem must be sporadic funding of ineffective programs when a coordination of existing resources targeting families was needed. But city government’s *justification* for minimal investment is different than the reality: City governments simply have limited money to invest. For public institutions, the fundraising flexibility exhibited by private ventures, like the Harlem Children’s Zone, is not an option. The enticing assumption that, perhaps, no new funding was *necessary* does not change the fact that no new funding was *available*.

Government Fragmentation

A focal point of the Circle of Promise was to transcend the “silos” of government, tackling the perception that government agencies operate independently and without appropriate coordination. This admirable goal betrays the reality of fragmented government. Indeed, the disjointed structure of policy accountability and policy implementation proved a formidable barrier to the holistic education initiative.

As the longest-serving mayor in the history of Boston, Thomas Menino exerts considerable top-down authority within his administration. But his reach has certain structural limits. In practice, some city departments are firmly under the control of the Mayor’s Office, such as the Environmental Department, Administration and Finance, and Public Works. Others, like the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), operate with considerable autonomy: the BRA has its own Board of Directors, and the Mayor’s Office controls smaller urban development projects through a separate agency, the Department of Neighborhood Development.

With respect to the Circle of Promise, policymakers in the Mayor’s Office concocted the initial idea for the policy, and formal leadership was assigned to Intergovernmental Relations, a department directly tied to the mayor. However Boston Public Schools (BPS), located in a separate building outside of City Hall, formulates its own education policies largely independent of direct mayoral intrusion. As policymakers planned the Circle of Promise, BPS created its own strategy to improve achievement in underperforming schools, including a number of school-based reforms such as increased teacher training and extended school days.

This institutional schism is most acute during discussions of data sharing and policy evaluation. BPS controls access to student data, such as grades, absences, and statewide standardized test scores. But BPS does not control the direction or mechanics of the Circle of Promise. Conversely, Intergovernmental Relations, under the direction of the Mayor’s Office, controls the Circle of Promise initiative, but does not have access to student data without BPS permission. This produces a fundamental tension: BPS “owns” the data to evaluate the policy, but not the responsibility to implement the policy. The Intergovernmental Relations department “owns” the policy, but not the data to evaluate. Consequently, BPS refuses to be held accountable for the evaluation of the Circle of Promise—and significantly limits the use of their data accordingly—and Intergovernmental Relations *can’t* be held accountable because they don’t have the data to evaluate the policy.³

The complicated structure of urban governance—fragmented systems of authority and responsibility—places the Circle of Promise in an institutional purgatory. Policymakers in the

Mayor's Office successfully brought different departments together under the guise of interdepartmental collaboration, but important cleavages remained. With a problem as complex as the achievement gap, city departments bought in to the principle of comprehensive service delivery, but were reticent to take on new responsibilities and, by extension, new dimensions of accountability. Fragmented urban governance also allowed City Hall to initiate an education policy without full institutional support from BPS, an institution one would expect to be at the forefront of any municipal education initiative.

The Downside of Increased Attention

Holistic education policies are en vogue in cities across the United States. Local initiatives are no doubt inspired by federal directives, namely the lasting legacy of No Child Left Behind and President Obama's "Race to the Top" initiative. Amidst heavy criticism, both federal policies place an emphasis on test scores, local accountability, and innovation. But there are downsides to trendy policies, regardless of merit. If a particular set of policy prescriptions are popular, overlapping initiatives may develop in the same city, targeting the same populations. Such was the case in Boston between 2010 and 2011: As planning for the Circle of Promise commenced, four separate education initiatives launched in the same geographic area.

First, Boston Public Schools began its aforementioned school-based reforms, named the Acceleration Agenda. Plans for the Acceleration Agenda actually predated the Circle of Promise, but after the Commonwealth of Massachusetts designated 12 city schools "Turnaround Schools", BPS incorporated targeted reforms into their 5-year plans (Boston Public Schools, 2010). These independently conceived reforms focused on the same schools targeted by the Circle of Promise.

Second, a group of local charitable foundations pledged \$27 million in 2010 to launch "a historic education partnership" called the Boston Opportunity Agenda. Like the Circle of Promise (but with millions of private investment dollars), the Boston Opportunity Agenda aimed to tackle the achievement gap through "a network of seamless educational experiences" throughout the life course (Boston Opportunity Agenda, 2010). The initiative's key novelty was the stated "partnership" between the Mayor's Office, BPS, and local foundations. The decision to fund-specific programs, however, predated the official announcement of the initiative. That is, the foundations were already independently funding education programs that were simply relabeled under the umbrella of the Boston Opportunity Agenda.

Also in 2010, Boston University School of Social Work Dean Emeritus Hubie Jones founded a new nonprofit, Higher Ground, modeled directly after the Harlem Children's Zone. Higher Ground focuses exclusively on the Warren Gardens housing development in Roxbury, squarely in the middle of the Circle of Promise. In a statement to the *Boston Globe*, Jones explained the difference between Higher Ground and the Harlem Children's Zone. Noting "fragmented service delivery" in Boston, Jones argued "Boston has a tremendous opportunity to build the best urban center that really addresses the needs of its poorest and working-class citizens, but we need to collaborate in a smart and effective way. . . . Boston is rich in resources, but it's impact poor" (Vaznis, 2011). Not only does Higher Ground target a subsection of the Circle's geographic focus, Jones' rhetoric directly mirrors the language used by policymakers leading the Circle of Promise.

Finally, in the fall of 2010, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) received a \$500,000 planning grant under President Obama's Promise Neighborhoods initiative. The Obama administration restricted municipalities from applying for the funding, though the Mayor's Office and BPS pledged full support for DSNI. Indeed, the Mayor's Office singled out DSNI, located in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, as one of the many existing resources targeted for the Circle of Promise. The only applicant to score a perfect "100" on its Promise Neighborhood Planning

Grant proposal, DSNI submitted an application for the multimillion dollar Implementation Grant in the fall of 2011.⁴

What does this mean for the Circle of Promise? While the Circle of Promise claimed to coordinate services, coordination between the overlapping initiatives did not materialize as of this paper’s writing. Certainly, the City of Boston is listed as a “partner” for the Opportunity Agenda, and sent the Obama administration a letter of support for DSNI’s Promise neighborhood application. But implementation and evaluation is carried out by the philanthropies and nonprofit organization, respectively; city government acts as supporter, “partner,” or passive recipient of funding. Meanwhile, the Circle of Promise is left to carve out its own niche in a sea of similar-sounding initiatives.

The result is the exact feeling of redundancy policymakers expected to alleviate with the Circle of Promise. Different institutions and organizations are offering their own distinct version of the same policy initiative, often employing the same language, framing, and rhetoric in their rationales. The situation can best be described as a shortcoming of good intentions: The influx of resources is a positive development in neighborhoods historically defined by a *lack* of resources, but their overlapping deployment undermines the promise of coordinated service delivery and makes it difficult to determine which programs are successful, and which are superfluous.

The Politics of Busing

The Circle of Promise is based on the idea that both neighborhoods and schools matter for life chances and social outcomes. But the logic of comprehensive service delivery to students of failing schools requires children to live in the same neighborhoods as the schools they attend. Boston’s unique racial history complicates plans for place-based, geographically targeted service delivery: A remnant of 1970s integration policy, BPS created busing zones and transports children to schools throughout the city. Unlike metropolitan systems of busing between segregated cities and suburbs, public school students are transported exclusively within the city’s boundaries.⁵ Consequently, BPS reports only two-thirds of children attending the 10 failing schools in the Circle of Promise actually live in that geographic area.

The politics of busing are central to Boston’s complicated racial history. During the spring of 1965, the Boston School Committee released a report on the “racial imbalance” of Boston’s public schools. School segregation, the committee maintained, “is educationally harmful to all children, white and nonwhite, because separation from others leads to ignorance of others and ignorance breeds fear and prejudice” (quoted in Lukas, 1985, p. 17). The city implemented a violently contested policy of busing—sending African American children in buses to integrate schools in majority white neighborhoods—as a result. The policy remains today, even though racial segregation is more evident between Boston and its suburbs, rather than within the city itself.

Figure 2 displays the residences of students attending the 10 failing schools located within the Circle of Promise. Clearly, the bulk of students attending the underperforming schools reside within the Circle’s boundaries. But it is also clear that additional students—many of whom contribute to the failing schools’ low achievement scores—do not live within the Circle of Promise, thus limiting their exposure to any neighborhood-based programs or family support.

Two aspects of busing require further elaboration as it relates to the Circle of Promise. First, busing in Boston effectively means neighborhood residents may not necessarily attend neighborhood schools. This is not a fundamental concern for school-based reforms, but it dramatically limits the reach of *place*-based interventions. Students that attend schools in the same neighborhoods they reside in will have full access to all programs and services offered within the place-based

Students attending Turnaround Schools in The Circle of Promise

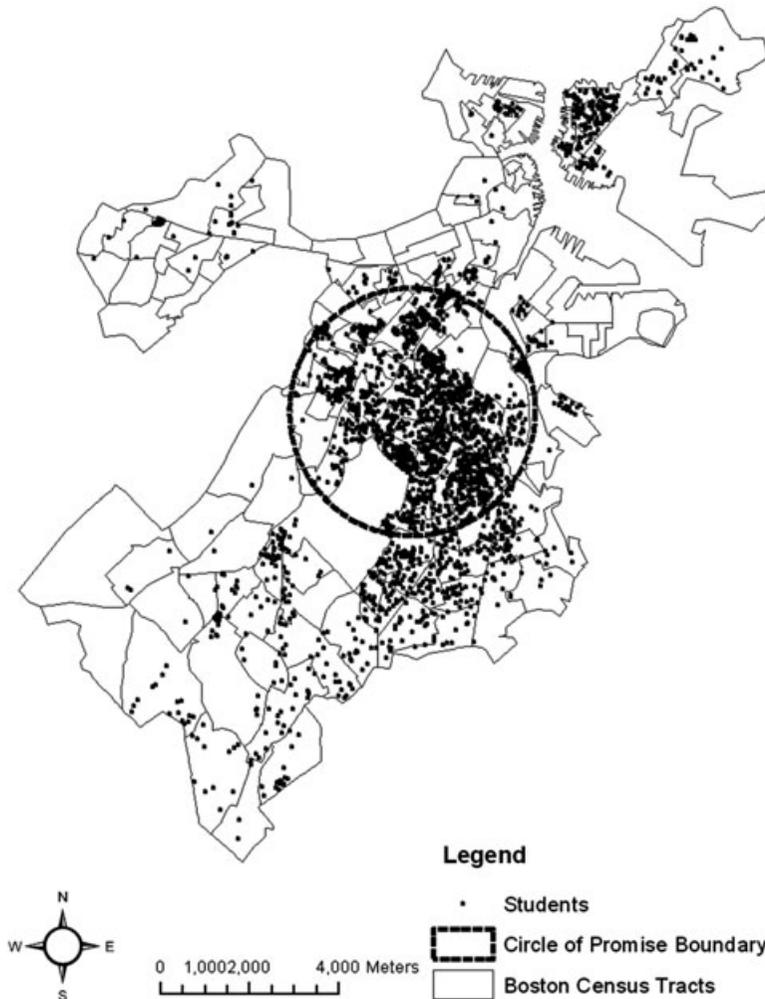


FIGURE 2

Student Residences

intervention. The same cannot be said for students that attend school, but do not reside, within the targeted geographic area: they will be bused home at the end of each day to areas of the city lacking the same wrap-around service provision. If organizational resources within the Circle of Promise are linked and coordinated, how can a student that lives outside the Circle access those services after the school day ends? And which youth represent the target population for services, the 41,000 residing within the Circle of Promise, the 5,200 attending failing schools in the Circle, or the 3,500 attending failing schools *and* residing in the Circle’s boundaries?

Moreover, busing relates to the larger issue of transportation for holistic education policies. Schools, neighborhood institutions, and students’ homes are fixed in place. A challenge for the Circle of Promise—and place-based policies in general—is to design efficient transport to and from after-school programs within the bounds of tight school budgets. This is a general challenge of place-based, wrap-around service delivery, but is exacerbated by Boston’s system of citywide

busing. Absent a political battle over busing, the Circle of Promise remains hampered by these constraints.⁶

CRITIQUES

A Focus on Message Overshadowing Implementation

Policymakers associated with the Circle of Promise thought extensively about the policy’s message; references to “education pipelines,” “holistic service delivery,” “community resources,” “cradle to college,” and other popular catch-phrases were common in city documents. Messaging and framing is of course important—indeed, politically imperative (Ansen, 2002)—but at what cost? In Boston, direct implementation plans often took a backseat to parsing out particular phrases, such as debates over calling the policy a “pilot,” or referring to the initiative as “place-based” compared to “neighborhood-based.” Implementation and action steps have been slow to materialize, if at all. And equally important, city officials sometimes tried to shape policy objectives based on normative commitments to certain concepts or phrases.

For example, the original purpose of the Circle of Promise was to target disadvantaged neighborhoods with failing schools, but many policymakers were careful not to use the language of deficiency when describing the policy’s target population. Instead, they attempted to frame the targeted area in a more positive light, specifically highlighting the incredible amount of local assets. Accordingly, bureaucrats associated with the initiative rearticulated the goal of the policy as teaching families “self-sufficiency” to use “the wealth that’s already around them.” Yet how can neighborhoods be simultaneously disadvantaged and asset rich? If these poor neighborhoods with failing schools are, in fact, full of resources, why are they being targeted for government intervention? Conceiving high poverty neighborhoods as asset-rich undermines government’s ability to implement meaningful action steps to increase local resources. The political motivation to reimagine high poverty neighborhoods as “wealthy” contradicted the very basis for the policy, that neighborhood disadvantage detrimentally affected academic achievement in the inner city.

The idea of comprehensive service delivery was another core piece of rhetoric for the Circle of Promise. The aforementioned “break down the silos” mantra was a common theme during planning sessions for the initiative. The fundamental idea was to create collaboration among disjointed institutions, both in the public sector (governmental departments) and the private sector (nonprofit organizations). The key innovation was to map out “pipelines” of services, heuristic diagrams that placed existing programs and nonprofit resources along a continuum of youth development. A normative commitment to the idea of “wrap-around services” or “holistic” policy development created palpable internal excitement about the initiative. As a result, niche governmental departments tangentially tied to youth—such as those exclusively targeting women, public housing tenants, or immigrant populations—were included in diagrams of coordinated youth service delivery.

Many small institutional divisions were overcome as a result, but what tangible changes were made to either the content or distribution of services? Unfortunately, the rhetoric of comprehensive service delivery merely allowed government to do more of the same. Every department or private nonprofit serving youth could be involved in the initiative, and their work would be listed alongside one another on a piece of paper or planning document to symbolize “coordination.” But if each institution continues doing the work they’ve always done, what about the Circle of Promise is different from the status quo? To what extent does the rhetoric of coordination block new actions steps by simply recreating the same conditions of inequality?

Nowhere is the disjuncture between message and implementation more apparent than the “Circle” itself. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts designated 12 schools in the city of Boston

“Turnaround Schools” in 2010. Turnaround Schools were selected based on low MCAS scores, a standardized test administered across the state. Ten of the 12 underperforming schools are located within the Circle, though due to the aforementioned politics of busing, some students of failing schools reside outside of the Circle’s boundaries.

The idea of a circle on a map to graphically illustrate the overlap of failing schools and impoverished neighborhoods enticed policymakers. But the geography of inequality made the ultimate “circle” an awkward fit. Indeed, the City’s Geographic Information Systems (GIS) team proposed no less than three distinct geographic specifications of the circle, each including different portions of neighborhood poverty. The most inclusive specification that still maintained the integrity of a pure circle breached the municipal border of Brookline, a neighboring suburb. City officials ultimately settled on a specification that kept the circle exclusively within Boston. As a result, the precise geography of the Circle of Promise barely includes 9 of the 12 failing schools, even though officials claim it includes 10. And, moreover, it cuts out significant areas of concentrated poverty—whole neighborhoods, in fact. Specifically, half of the Dorchester district and the entirety of Mattapan fall out of the Circle, even though both areas are majority–minority and include some of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. The Circle of Promise promised to be a circular overlap of poor neighborhoods and struggling schools, but the commitment to an esthetically pleasing geographic shape removed entire inner city neighborhoods from the policy’s target area.

Such contradictions riddled press releases and private conversations among policymakers. These contradictions produced three core tensions, each with implications for policy implementation: policymakers accepted neighborhood disadvantage within the Circle of Promise, but were reluctant to refer to neighborhoods as deficient; they held a normative commitment to “collaboration” but didn’t address how coordinated service delivery changed the status quo of service provision; and they created a “circle” that was esthetically pleasing but didn’t actually include each of the city’s poor neighborhoods or underperforming schools. Each piece of messaging—deemphasizing the deficiency of poor neighborhoods, using the rhetoric of comprehensive service provision, and labeling the grand scheme a “Circle of Promise”—provides a palatable framing for the policy. But in so doing, policymakers favored normative commitments to phrases or concepts, even when their framing was in direct conflict with practical plans of implementation.

Vague Goals; Goals in Flux

The policy’s precise goals were hard to define. Goals and objectives lacked specificity and meaning beyond widely accepted platitudes, and notably, changed considerably during the summer of 2010. Specifically, the policy originated as an education initiative that integrated neighborhood resources for student achievement, based on the assumption that neighborhood vitality and family health affects academic achievement for children living in poverty. Yet that focus on achievement quickly evolved into a more general antipoverty policy as City officials struggled to reconcile rhetoric with action.

On paper, policymakers adopted a “kitchen sink” approach to the Circle of Promise, including plans to support early childhood education, financial literacy for families, job creation, commercial development, domestic violence prevention, prenatal care, and countless other efforts. They crafted a plan to link all of these services for youth, their families, and their impoverished neighborhoods, adopting the phrase “whole child, whole family, whole community” as a temporary slogan. The goals for the newly comprehensive education policy would be high student achievement, family self-sufficiency, and community-level health and stability. Consequently it’s difficult to imagine a single city initiative, department, or service that *wouldn’t* be included when framing the policy objectives so broadly.

By the fall of 2010, policymakers took the education initiative and reframed it as a strategy of wealth creation. As the focus on education slowly incorporated components of neighborhood-based interventions, policymakers took on a new antipoverty language. Phrases like “creating cradle to college pipelines” were replaced with calls to “break the cycle of poverty.” But the Circle of Promise did not fully shed its roots in the achievement gap: Policymakers claimed the goal of the initiative would be “creating wealth in an impoverished community,” but “high academic success is how we measure it [wealth creation].”

Closing the achievement gap is difficult enough; trying to tackle poverty is practically insurmountable for a single municipality (Peterson, 1981). Even if we accept the problematic premise that neighborhood wealth creation can be measured by student academic success, the dramatic shift in policy focus paralyzes implementation steps. More to the point, overly broad goals are difficult to translate into tangible, on-the-ground programming or service delivery. If policymakers cannot define a precise objective, or if the objective includes countless dimensions, it becomes difficult to put a system in place to challenge the status quo and alter patterns of inequality.

Data-Driven Policy in Practice

Public officials across the country use the phrase “data-driven policy” to describe various forms of technocratic governance. In principle, data-driven policy allows governments to design policies based on hard evidence, and by extension promote greater fairness and equality while avoiding charges of nepotism or discrimination. To say that policy is driven by data, however, is not to suggest policymakers approach data with the eye of a social scientist. Under tremendous political pressure, government bureaucracies rarely employ positivist norms of hypothesis testing. Instead, officials use data to inform *strategy*, relying on preexisting assumptions—not data—to explain the causes of social problems. In the Circle of Promise, officials used assumptions to explain the presence of the achievement gap, whereas data, by contrast, were used to support assumptions and build strategy.

Policymakers used a combination of folk wisdom and common rhetoric to explain the presence of the achievement gap, relying on two central assumptions. First, consider the policy’s emphasis on linking existing nonprofit resources with government services. Officials argued that Boston’s inner city was saturated with nonprofit organizations providing an array of resources. They were less concerned with the flow of resources and the extent of interorganizational collaborations, and more interested in how these organizations could be held accountable for student success. Data, in this instance, were collected with the explicit intention to identify redundant services, which in turn could be leveraged as a bargaining chip against private nonprofits “not making an impact.” But serious geographic and service gaps exist within the Circle’s boundaries. To many policymakers, however, identifying gaps conflicted with their motivation to find redundancy. Policymakers asked, “Why are there so many organizations, and what are they all doing?” Framing the question in this manner presupposes redundancy, skewing any interpretation of data indicating the limited distribution of organizational resources.

A second motivating assumption related to the cost of successful policy interventions. There was an overwhelming belief that local nonprofits received excessive funding, most of which supported organizational survival at the expense of student achievement. When presented with data from the IRS on reported organizational operating costs, officials were shocked to learn that millions of dollars funded nonprofits in the Circle, and yet the achievement gap persisted. The suggestion that perhaps *hundreds of millions of dollars* was necessary fell on deaf ears. Officials did not ask, “What would it cost to close the achievement gap?” Instead, they asked, “How can we leverage the immense investment in nonprofit services and hold them accountable?” The latter question contains a built-in assumption of widespread, abundant services, whereas the

former directly challenges assumptions about the status quo. Officials relied on a preexisting assumption that organizations were overresourced. Data on organizational budgets were used as supporting evidence, and officials strategized ways to cut off funding for nonprofits failing to make measurable impacts, broadly defined.

Two assumptions—that Boston’s inner city contained a plethora of organizational resources, and that they were excessively funded—influenced how policymakers determined the problem of the achievement gap, and data were consequently used to support rather than test these assumptions. The question driving the Circle of Promise was, “How can we leverage existing resources?” Policymakers were not concerned with asking, “What factors influence academic achievement?” Nor did they inquire, “Which combinations of school and neighborhood services yield the best outcomes for children?” Such questions focus on strategy rather than open-ended research inquiries, and data are used to support strategy rather than answer fundamental questions about social processes. As a result, officials used data on the dearth of certain resources to target redundancy, and information on funding to support an assumption of overresourced nonprofits. To put it plainly, data were used in practice as supporting evidence for preformulated arguments or viewpoints, not epistemological “drivers” of policy. In this framework, the practice of data-driven policy allows government and other institutions to operate as usual, with data used to justify normalized institutional practices.

INSTITUTIONAL ENTRENCHMENT AND HOLISTIC EDUCATION POLICY

Through the City of Boston’s partnership with LIFT-Boston, the Circle of Promise remains a prominent policy within the Menino administration. Key obstacles, however, remain. Taking our aforementioned challenges to municipality-led holistic education policy—inadequate funding, agency fragmentation, overlapping initiatives, and the politics of busing—as well as our critiques of Boston’s particular initiative—an overemphasis on messaging, vague goals, and assumption-driven policymaking—we consider *institutional entrenchment* to be the overarching force blocking successful education policies. Institutional entrenchment refers to “long-accepted mechanisms for allocating resources and staffing, which have become ‘normal’ and gained constituencies willing to fight to maintain their current privileges” (Bloome, 2008, quoted in Wilson, 2010). Institutional entrenchment, we argue, represents a key impediment to combatting inequality in America.

Indeed, the challenges to holistic education policy in Boston poignantly illustrate institutional entrenchment. Without a profound change to education funding structures, municipalities will continue to struggle for the financial investment required for holistic education policies. Without changes to the structural organization of government agencies, City departments will remain fragmented. In the absence of focused attention on places and people in need, institutions will continue to propose overlapping initiatives. And with decades-old policies of student desegregation in place, students in Boston will continue to be bused to schools throughout the city. Put simply, without fundamental changes to the ways institutions function and operate, education inequality will remain in Boston and other cities, even in the face of seemingly transformative policies.

Our critiques of Boston’s Circle of Promise similarly point to the problem of institutional entrenchment. With an excessive focus on messaging, broad goals, and assumption-driven data interpretation, institutions are allowed to carry on business as usual. After proposing the Circle of Promise, few structural changes coincided with the adoption of new rhetoric. That is not to say the City of Boston’s policy or motivations were rooted in anything but the best of intentions. Indeed the rhetoric itself signifies a tremendous commitment to equality and a noteworthy acknowledgment of the complexities of urban poverty and the racial achievement gap. But the reality of this

policy innovation, once the layers of messaging are removed, is that institutions continue to operate as they always have. The only change would be “coordination,” or in practice, moderate communication. Entrenchment persists under the guise of innovation.

It is important to remember that the Circle of Promise is an ongoing initiative; many of our critiques may (we hope) lose relevance as the policy progresses. But the general institutional challenges and initial approaches to policymaking, we believe, are theoretically generalizable to other municipalities engaging in similar strategies of holistic education policy. Nonetheless, a basic question remains: can efforts to implement policy innovations overcome the barriers created by institutional entrenchment? To provide an answer to this question, particularly as it applies to the problems confronting the Circle of Promise, we conclude with a discussion of recent examples of the successful integration of federal and municipal policies with respect to public education.

Overcoming Institutional Entrenchment: The Integration of Federal and Municipal Policies

When President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was passed in 2002, it raised the ante for states’ accountability by introducing stiff sanctions on schools that were not meeting the administration’s performance criteria. Though its effects remain quite controversial, the law did focus attention on the achievement gap and challenge schools to substantiate their role in helping to narrow it. In so doing, it reinforced the need for transparency and data-driven results and forced teachers’ unions and school administrators to take greater responsibility for students’ performance.

President Obama sought to put his imprimatur on the drive toward federal accountability. With the “Race to the Top” incentive program, the current administration is vigorously stimulating reforms with many (purse) strings attached. Race to the Top seeks to motivate a framework that reaffirms the academic purpose of public schools and spurs innovation and competition by providing incentives, including financial incentives, to improve student achievement, especially in underperforming schools. Applying a “carrot and stick” approach, the Obama administration used some of the 100 billion dollars from the economic stimulus package earmarked for education as leverage to promote reforms in public schools. Under the Race to the Top initiative schools districts with under performing schools are required to develop plans to improve student performance in order to be eligible for additional funding. Moreover, with a deliberate strategy designed to increase competition among schools, the Obama administration encouraged the growth of public charter schools. For example, they promptly informed the states that if any of them put a cap on the growth of public charter schools, funds would be withheld. What charter schools have in common is that they are independent and fairly autonomous and therefore can pay teachers on the basis of performance or duties as opposed to traditional pay scales that put the spotlight on seniority and credentials; and many have an extended school day and a long school year. These federal education reforms therefore forced changes to the rules of engagement among school administrators, teachers’ unions, and state and local officials.

One of the ultimate designs of Race to the Top is to overcome institutional entrenchment, so that students left in underperforming traditional public schools can ultimately be rescued. Michelle A. Rhee, former Chancellor of the DC public schools, responded to the Obama Administration’s Race to the Top grant competition to more rigorously judge the effectiveness of teachers in the class room, by getting the Washington, DC Council to significantly raise teacher salaries based not on traditional seniority protections, but on results in the classroom. Moreover, the accord provided for a “performance pay” system with \$20,000–\$30,000 annual bonuses for teachers who meet certain standards, including growth in test scores. This system, which was bitterly opposed by the Washington, DC Teacher’s Union, is applied annually to determine teacher effectiveness. Prior

to the introduction of this system, teachers were rarely dismissed because of poor performance. Even the worst teachers were protected by union regulations, including seniority rules. Moreover, former Mayor Adrian Fenty and Michelle Rhee reported that a larger percentage of the system's taxpayer dollars are going directly to the classroom and less money is being spent to support a "formerly inefficient and bloated central office." Prior to Rhee's tenure, schools were plagued with operational issues that affected the overall quality of education including undelivered classroom books, shoddy facilities, and late paychecks (Fenty and Rhee, 2010). Although Rhee eventually resigned following the defeat of Mayor Adrian Fenty by Vincent Gray in the primary election, the innovative policies that she introduced remain in place.

The response to Obama's Race to the Top program in Boston provides yet another example of overcoming institutional entrenchment in the public schools. One of the goals of the Obama administration was to promote the creation of effective public charter schools to put pressure on traditional public schools to reform, and thereby address the chronic problems of institutional entrenchment. This is clearly revealed in Boston, where the growth of successful public charter schools triggered a historic public education reform law. As stated in a 2010 report by the Boston Foundation:

The movement to lift the cap on charter schools gained steam throughout the year, spurred in part by President Barack Obama's Race to the Top federal funding strategy for education, which emphasizes innovation and encourages the establishment of more good charter schools. Inspired by the potential for hundreds of thousands in federal funds for education, in the spring of 2009 Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick announced support for in-district charters. To show his support of the decision, the new U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan came to Massachusetts to join the Governor for the announcement. (Boston Foundation, 2010)

Under the leadership of the Boston Foundation, a coalition of Massachusetts business and civic leaders, who shared the common goal of closing the state's chronic achievement gap, was created in October 2009. Identified as "The Race to the Top Coalition," its primary aim was to pressure the Massachusetts State Legislature to pass legislation needed to address the persistent achievement gap in the Boston public schools. The Race to the Top Coalition held high-level press conferences at the Massachusetts State House, reportedly worked behind the scenes to shape the House and Senate versions of the bill, and then helped to craft a compromise bill that was approved by both the House and Senate on January 14, 2010. The new legislation not only doubles the number of charter school seats in the state, it also includes a new pay-for-excellence plan that allows the Boston Public Schools to grant special rewards to exceptional teachers, and grants principals in turnaround schools the authority to adopt schedules that best address the needs of the students as well as to choose the best teachers across the school district.

Both the innovative changes in Washington, DC and Boston were achieved despite strong opposition from the teachers unions concerned about protecting traditional union prerogatives such as salary increases and promotions based mainly on seniority. And both cases involved the intervention of strong leadership to overcome such institutional entrenchment—the forceful leadership of Michele Rhee in Washington, DC and the organizing leadership of the Boston Foundation. Are there lessons here for overcoming the kinds of institutional entrenchment that are currently plaguing the Circle of Promise initiative that we have documented above?

We think that the activities of the Boston Foundation provide the better model to confront the institutional entrenchment that prevents the Circle of Promise from ultimately achieving its publicly stated objective. Representing a powerful outside organization, the Boston Foundation publicly articulated the problem of educational achievement in the Boston public schools, including the issue of institutional entrenchment, and then mobilized a coalition whose members shared

a common objective but did not have a vested interest in maintaining or preserving long-held practices. It would seem that a Boston Foundation or an equivalent outside organization would be needed, first of all, to investigate and spell out the problems plaguing the Circle of Promise. Secondly, this outside organization would need to form a coalition with other outside groups to bring about the needed structural changes, including changes that would prompt the respective institutions involved in the Circle of Promise to move away from doing business as usual.

This of course is a general framework for addressing the problems of institutional entrenchment in the Circle of Promise. A discussion of specific steps that might be taken by the coalition, including the mobilization of political resources, is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say at this point that outside pressure on the institutions of the Circle of Promise is essential if the initial stated goal—enhancing the education of students in underperforming schools—is to be realized.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The MCAS is a statewide, standardized test for grades 1–12, and is used by state education officials to comply with federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) performance standards. The exam procedure was introduced in Massachusetts following the Education Reform Law of 1993, and is analogous to standardized tests in other states.
- 2 We used ArcGIS Desktop 10.0 to create this figure. For each census tract, we normalized the percent African American by the median household income to create four ranges.
- 3 The issue of data sharing and institutional fragmentation is more complex than a simple BPS–City Hall fissure, however. BPS’ reticence to share individual-level student data—such as information on absences, grades, or standardized test scores—stems largely from their reading of federal data privacy laws, specifically the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). FERPA is designed to protect families from the illegitimate use of students’ personal information. The BPS legal team would cite these privacy laws when approached by representatives from the Mayor’s office looking for such data, since some level of personal information was required to link student academic records with records from other municipal departments. (Indeed, one of the paper’s authors was specifically asked by city policymakers to conduct research on FERPA restrictions to aid negotiations with BPS). So too did data privacy issues permeate the relationship between policymakers and private nonprofits. Nonprofits were equally reticent to share data on youth participants—especially those involved with the criminal justice system—for fear of inappropriate municipal intrusion into their participants’ lives. The privacy concerns from BPS and private nonprofits are no doubt warranted, but fragmented authority and information channels limited the ability of policymakers to institute the widespread reform they originally envisioned.
- 4 DSNI was ultimately unsuccessful in its implementation grant application.
- 5 An exception is the Metco Program, funded by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. As part of the program, approximately 3,200 minority students from Boston are bused from the city to wealthier suburban public schools. Participation in the program is highly competitive.
- 6 Recent developments in Boston put the future of busing in question. As of the writing of this article, the mayor has appointed an advisory group intended to reconsider the utility of school busing zones (Harmon, 2012). The group’s recommendations and ultimate outcome, however, remain unclear.

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