

INTERVIEW WITH ALBERT SHANKER  
PRESIDENT, AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS  
ON THE  
DIANE REHM SHOW, WAMU-FM RADIO

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DIANE REHM: In a new report prepared for President Reagan, Education Secretary Bill Bennett said efforts to improve public schools over the past five years have produced disappointing results. He said too many students are dropping out, and those who do graduate are poorly educated. But a number of education officials have criticized the new report as too negative.

Albert Shanker is president of the American Federation of Teachers, which has over 670,000 members across the country. He says that the school reform movement, which has emphasized stricter graduation requirements and more homework, may have actually set back a majority of students. But he says there's another reform movement in the U.S. that could address the needs of this silent majority.

Dr. Shanker is in the studio with me this morning. We're going to take your calls between now and 10:30.

Dr. Shanker, it's a pleasure to have you here.

ALBERT SHANKER: Good to be here.

DIANE REHM: Please tell me your reaction to Secretary of Education Bennett's report.

ALBERT SHANKER: Well, it's rather mixed. First, I happen to agree with his conclusion. I too am disappointed, and I also think that while we're probably doing a better job educating our

kids -- more kids and to a higher standard than ever before -- it's just not good enough for today's world. When, in 1940, 80 percent of the kids dropped out and only 20 percent graduated, there were no headlines because those kids could go to a war plant or lend-lease in those days, or into coal mines or steel mills or jobs on farms. Today, these jobs are being lost and they're disappearing. People who are going to have jobs, to analyze it, are going to have to have higher skills, and we are not producing a large number of those. So I agree with his estimate that schools are not producing in sufficient numbers students who have the skills needed to work productively within our society.

I do not agree with his remedies. They are very simple-minded. As a matter of fact, if you think about them, they are ridiculous.

DIANE REHM: For example?

ALBERT SHANKER: For example, if everybody were like Jaime Escalante, all kids would learn. Well, we don't know if that's true, but if it's true I invite Mr. Bennett to go out and find 2.4 million Jaime Escalantes. This is something like if C. Everett Koop would get up and say, "We really know how to cure cancer," and then if he were to cite some miracle person who's done some wonderful things with a group of patients and say, "See that? If he does it, everybody can do it." That's just not helpful.

DIANE REHM: Go into that Jaime Escalante story just a little bit.

ALBERT SHANKER: Well, Jaime Escalante is an extraordinary teacher. He started in a school in Los Angeles which was falling apart, where there was a lot of violence, and he went into classrooms and got a bunch of kids to learn calculus. And there are kids who have gotten advance placement in colleges and universities. His accomplishment was so extraordinary that the Educational Testing Service thought the kids were cheating. It is truly an amazing story, and there's no doubt in my mind that Jaime Escalante is an amazing person.

But there aren't 2.4 million people like that. Occasionally you find some outstanding doctors, some outstanding lawyers. It doesn't do you any good to say, well, one person can do it; why doesn't everybody else do it the same way? If they could, they would.

DIANE REHM: Some of the recommendations in Mr. Bennett's report include some that he's made before, namely, merit pay for teachers and --

ALBERT SHANKER: Jaime Escalante didn't get any merit pay.

DIANE REHM: -- opening the profession to teachers who may not be certified.

What is your reaction to those?

ALBERT SHANKER: There are a lot of things I agree with. For example, I favor testing teachers before they go on the job, and I favored it long before Bill Bennett got anywhere close to being Secretary of Education. I favor the same values, and I think kids ought to learn about American history and democracy, and I want all kids to be able to appreciate good music and Shakespeare and to learn how to count. It's not that we

disagree on those things. And I favor some experimentation. If you have a shortage of teachers, why not bring in people who are very good at math or very good at history or very good at English, and try to work with them, try to get them in as teachers and try to get them some of the skills that it takes to reach children? We all know there could be a brilliant mathematician who can't explain to anyone else how he gets at it. I don't disagree with those things.

What Bennett does not recognize is that kids are different and that 20 percent of us can sit and listen to someone for five hours a day and can remember what the person says, can listen to the words and can read a book, and we later then go to college and we're the successful students. Sitting next to us are kids who are just as smart as we are but they don't learn by listening to someone talk all day, or they can't sit. How do I know they're so smart? Because I meet them later on, and they've invented things that have made millions of dollars; they have a marvelous sense of humor; they understand politics. But they can't sit still and listen to somebody for five or six hours a day.

DIANE REHM: And it's for these 75 or 80 percent that you feel the approaches used so far may even have been counter-productive?

ALBERT SHANKER: Sure, exactly. Up to now, a lot of those kids remained in school because they were told if you stay long enough you'll eventually get a diploma. That had some bad effects because it meant that a lot of kids who could do the work said, "Well, if I'm going to get it anyway, I won't work

as hard." Now that we've told these other kids that unless you can pass the following test you won't get a diploma, some of them are saying, "Gee, I'll never pass that test so there's no point in staying here." And the dropout rate has actually increased a little bit.

Now, I'm not saying that our schools should get soft. What I'm saying is -- think of what a doctor does: You go to the doctor and he says, "Well, I think that's what you've got, and here's why I think so: It's going around the neighborhood. Here's what your temperature shows. Here's what your blood pressure shows." And then he says, "Here, try this," and he gives you something. If you go back to him and say, "Doc, not only didn't that not cure me, but it actually made me break out in certain ways," if that doctor were Bill Bennett, he would say, "You've got a heck of a lot of nerve not responding to my pill. What kind of a miserable, rotten patient are you?"

Now, the doctor doesn't say that. The doctor says, "Gee, I'm sorry. I gave you the right thing. More people respond to that medicine than any other, but some people react. I'm sorry. Here, try this. And if that doesn't work, come on back and we'll try something else."

DIANE REHM: Talk about some of these programs that you think might be able to help this 70 or 75 or 80 percent that you think is not being reached.

ALBERT SHANKER: Well, some of them might learn by looking at videotapes and seeing things in a more pictorial form. Some of them could profit from computer simulation games. A lot of kids learn best from other kids who are about their age and who

have learned to help them.

Think about this: Think about the kid who is asked a question on Monday morning and he stands up in front of 25 other kids and he doesn't know the answer. Then you call on him in the afternoon and he doesn't know the answer again. Then you call on him the next day with another question. What are we doing to that kid? We're humiliating him, publicly humiliating him in front of all his friends. Does humiliation get people to want to learn more? Well, just ask anybody who tried to learn how to drive by having his husband or wife or boyfriend or girlfriend as a teacher. You don't want someone close to you to see you stumbling and fumbling and making mistakes.

So, one of the things that we need in school is that we've got to protect those little kids when they're young and insecure and say, "Hey, if you make mistakes we're going to see to it that not everybody else sees you making those mistakes" -- settings that are smaller, settings that are more private.

Or think of this: We take a whole year of kids into the first grade and we say to them, "Well, you're first graders and you're all six years old and you're all going to do the same work." Now, are they all six years old? No, some of them are only five and some of them are practically seven because we have a mechanical date, and if you have a certain birthdate you come on in. That means the oldest kid is about a year and a half older than the youngest kid in the class. Does a year and a half make a difference at the age of six? Wow, it's tremendous; it's one-third or one-fourth of the intellectual development of a child. That's like putting a heavyweight boxer in a ring

with a lightweight boxer and saying go ahead and fight.

Guess what happens later on? When you look at these dropouts, a very disproportionately large number of them happened to be the kids who were the youngest kids in the class in first grade.

DIANE REHM: You've talked about an approach to education that would allow groups of teachers to create automomous programs within their own schools.

Can you expand on that?

ALBERT SHANKER: Well, it's very much like what an automobile company does when it wants to create a new automobile. It gets 10 or 15 people as a team who believe in it, who've got smarts and who've got a combination of capabilities, and it says go out and you're a task force to create something new.

I think what we need are new types of schools, schools that are good to other types of children than the Al Shankers and the Bill Bennetts, schools that will enable kids who are terrific at music or art or building things with their hands or watching things when they can see it as a picture -- the same goals. I want them to read Shakespeare; I want them to learn mathematics. I'm not giving up on getting at those kids, but different ways of approaching them.

What I want to do is, instead of having one single school system in this country where everybody has to sit still, keep quiet, listen to the same lecture, read the same book and take the same test -- and 80 percent of the kids are not learning this way, and they haven't learned for the last hundred years,

and it is a sin to keep giving the same remedy to people who are not cured by it -- what I want are teams of teachers, six to 12 teachers, and let them say, "We have a different idea as to how to organize a school. Give us a chance to take a corner of this building and we're going to do it in a different way. We're going to use technology, we're going to have the kids' failures be relatively private, we're not going to group kids of different ages together that compete with each other, we're going to have older kids helping younger kids, whatever those ideas are."

Now, they have to convince parents to send their kids to their school, so it's a voluntary school. No teacher is forced to teach in this different school; no parent is forced to send a child. If we don't have an answer to how to educate 80 percent of the youngsters, we're engaged in something like trying to find a cure for cancer or the common cold or for AIDS. Bill Bennett is wrong when he stands up there and says we know what to do. If we know what to do, why aren't we doing it? We don't know what to do. We need to look for an answer, and the way to look is to allow thousands of groups to look for one by creating different models.

DIANE REHM: Wouldn't you be putting a great deal of responsibility on the individual teachers to come up with a program, to come up with a curriculum, that suits their particular students?

ALBERT SHANKER: Well, sure you're putting a great deal on the first group of teachers that go into this. They're going to work a lot harder and they're going to spend a lot of time

talking to each other and reading books and going to conferences, and they're going to make mistakes because there's no way you can come up with something new and something better without making mistakes. And when they make mistakes, by the way, I want them to publish these mistakes for the entire world so that no one will ever die of these mistakes again.

I don't want them to do what the Bill Bennetts of this world do, and that is to smile and say everything they ever proposed is a big success. Failure is an important way of learning and of getting knowledge.

Sure, it's going to do that, but I think we can find thousands of groups of teachers in this country who have ideas and who are willing to try them and who are willing to work a lot harder and in teams to make it work.

That's the secret of the quality of the Japanese products. They don't have someone from above treating workers as though they were a bunch of mere hired hands and a bunch of ignorant people merely following somebody's orders. The secret of Japanese quality and of those American companies that turn out quality products is how do you engage everyone in the enterprise in making it better? And that means engaging teachers.

It also means listening to kids carefully. If a kid doesn't learn something, ask him, "Why do you think you don't learn this? What's bothering you?" When do we ever ask the kid? The kid is the one who is the worker.

DIANE REHM: What about some experiments in this direction? Have you seen some schools trying it out?

ALBERT SHANKER: I've seen some schools here, but the best model that I saw, the one that's very exciting -- because it's been in existence now for 17 years and is producing remarkable results -- is in Germany, in Cologne. It's a school that has a lot of Moroccan kids in it, it's got Turkish kids in it, Greeks -- it looks like an American urban school with multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism. It's a school with kids who have been told they can't go to college, so they can't go to what's called the "Gymnasium" there, which is their tract upper school.

What this school does that's different is this: One, instead of assigning a bunch of kids to a class with a teacher, they assign, let's say, a hundred kids to seven teachers, and the seven teachers as a team have to do the following: First, how do you group these kids, how do you break them up into separate classes? And instead of breaking kids up who are friends, which is what they do here because we don't want the kids talking to each other, they put friends together so they can help each other, just as people on a ball team together will help each other.

Secondly, these teachers have to figure out how to group the time during the day. In an American school, the bell rings every 40 minutes and the kids go to a different teacher, sit with a different group of kids, and do a totally different job. If you think of any office that would organize its office work that way, send the office worker to a different desk with different workers and give him a different job every 40 minutes, that's insane. But that's what we do. So they can say, "Look, we can spend the whole morning on German. We don't have to move

around in 40 minutes. We can spend a whole day on science." The teachers make that decision.

The third thing the teachers do as a group is decide which subjects and which areas they're good at and feel comfortable with what they're going to do. So that's number one.

Two, no lecturing to the kids. The kids sit at tables, five kids to a table, and the kids' job is to learn how to get knowledge as a team. And the kinds of questions that are thrown out are not memory questions which you memorize one day and forget the next day but questions like this: You all know about time zones, kids, don't you? Here we are in Cologne; what time is it now in New York, and what time is it in San Francisco? Good, now you understand that.

Now, at your tables -- we don't want you to get the right answer; we want you to come up with the best creative idea -- when did time zones first start? Were there time zones when Jesus was around? Did George Washington move from one time zone to another? Did Abraham Lincoln? When did they start? Why do you think they were put into effect? Who might have wanted them? Who might have opposed them? What would be the effect in the world today if we didn't have 24 time zones but had only 12? What if we had only six? What if someone proposed to abolish time zones tomorrow; who would be for it and who would be against it?

Now, notice, those kids will never forget about time zones after they've finished spending a half-hour trying to come up with the best theory, the best hypothesis. Creativity, imagination -- that's much more important than memorizing a

bunch of facts.

DIANE REHM: Dr. Shanker, you seem to be arguing that the school system has basically remained the same in the 40 or 50 years looking back --

ALBERT SHANKER: Two hundred years.

DIANE REHM: Basically remained the same -- and the needs are changing dramatically as the population changes dramatically, and that somehow Dr. Bennett is looking in one direction, that is, looking back on the old ways and to strengthen them, and you're saying we've got to move into a whole new era.

ALBERT SHANKER: Yes, but it's not that the population has changed. I went to school in the 1930s and early 1940s, and if you think of the 1930s, we had marvelous teachers because we had a depression, so you had college graduates -- who in those days were the top 5 percent of the American people -- lined up for jobs, waiting eight years to get a teaching job because it was a good job in those days during the depression. So we had good teachers. Second, we had an impact family. We didn't have all the problems we have today with families. Third, I never heard of drugs as a kid. Fourth, there was no television. The biggest crime in school was chewing gum or whispering or passing a note, and not the use of drugs or rape or violence or anything like that. We had a set curriculum. We had Bill Bennett's curriculum, and I loved it; and we had homework and we had examinations.

DIANE REHM: And we did it all.

ALBERT SHANKER: And we did it. And if I came home and

complained about the teacher, I'd get a beating for complaining about the teacher.

Well, what happened in 1940? How good was that education? It was wonderful. Here I am, right? But I was one of 20 percent of the kids who graduated in those days. Eighty percent couldn't take it -- with great teachers, tough curriculum, parents who were together in a family, no drugs. Doesn't that tell you that if Bill Bennett had everything he wanted -- Bill Bennett's slogan ought to be "Back to 1935." Well, that's what he wants. If he could push a button, that's what he'd have. He'd have the school system of 1935. And I'm saying it didn't work in 1935 for 80 percent of the kids and it won't work today.

DIANE REHM: Let's open the phones. We've got a lot of callers waiting.

QUESTION: Good morning.

The Japanese system, could you explain how that differs from the American system of the 1930s? Is there a significant difference between the way the Japanese bring their children into the educational process from early on until high school? Does that differ significantly from our system in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s?

ALBERT SHANKER: You know, that's a very good question. It's like our system of the 1930s except more so; that is, they start training the kids practically at the time they're born. They start sending them to preparation schools to get into nursery schools and pre-nursery schools, and everything is competitive. If a Japanese child is absent from school, the mother goes to school and sits in the child's seat all day long

and takes notes and goes home at night and gives the kid the lessons. And out of all the countries in the world, that's the only country where at the end of high school practically all their kids have a very high rate of literacy and numeracy. They also fall apart when they go to college and don't go to class and don't do anything in their four or five years of college because they're all burned out.

The other thing they're not good at is imagination and creativity. They memorize everything. You can't go into a high school class in Japan and get a discussion going on the relative merits or demerits of something. And the Japanese now have a Commission for School Reform, and the Commission is dealing with how can we get our kids to be creative so we can have some Nobel Prize winners and do some creative things. So theirs is the maximization of the American system of the 1930s, and they don't like it.

QUESTION: I just wanted to say I'm glad that he brought up this topic because I remember when I was in school I could never sit still, never sit still, and teachers always put me down. They always ridiculed me in front of other students. Now I've just published my own directory, I speak two languages, and I am intelligent and I am articulate. But whenever you don't fit into the scheme or the pattern in school, you're absolutely rejected and almost traumatized. And I'm glad he brought that out today.

DIANE REHM: And I'm glad you called. Thanks so much.

Dr. Shanker, do you want to comment?

ALBERT SHANKER: Well, there are just millions of people

like you out there who, if you don't fit -- look, the poor teacher is told, "If the kids aren't sitting still, you're a lousy teacher." So the teacher then starts blaming the kids because the teacher is filled with fear, and the teacher is asked to do something impossible, which is to get -- I mean, we all know that we all learn in different ways and at different rates. But the way schools are organized we know that everybody learns at a different rate but you'd better learn at the same rate that I'm speaking.

DIANE REHM: So are you saying that there's no incentive, as those schools are now organized, to move into the kinds of changes you're talking about?

ALBERT SHANKER: That's right. What you're going to get is a lot of kids labeled and a lot of kids feeling that there's something wrong with them, that they're sick or they're disturbed or they're special or they're this, when actually it's the schools and the organization of the school that's wrong for most human beings. And what we need to do is encourage teachers. And most of them see that and they know it. And if we were to say to parents and teachers, "Stop creating one single mold of school for everybody that doesn't work for most kids, and let's start developing something which will enable kids who learn in different ways and at different times, let's respect them, let's respect their individuality" -- I mean, the main thing we do with kids is destroy the only thing that can help a kid to learn; that is, maintaining your own self-esteem, your own belief in yourself, your own constant effort. The minute we convince a kid that he's dumb and that he's no good,

that kid stops trying.

DIANE REHM: You haven't talked about cost, Dr. Shanker.

ALBERT SHANKER: I don't think it costs any more to get a bunch of people to do things differently in these ways. It might even cost less. If you had a team with good team leadership, you might not need all the inspectors you have right now. You might need fewer people curing kids of a disease which we create.

I think at the beginning you will need some money because these teachers will need some extra time. You might have to employ them over some summer time to talk to each other. You might have to get them some books, like Ted Sizer's books and John Goodlad's and other people's, so they can read about some different ideas. You might want somebody from each team to be able to go to some other schools doing things differently so that they can see these things. But these are networking costs.

DIANE REHM: When you address members of your union, what kind of reception do you get, what kind of reaction from the teachers you're talking to?

ALBERT SHANKER: Well, some of them are very traditional and they like it that way and they don't feel that they want to change. So I say to them, "Look, I'm proposing a voluntary plan. Go ahead. If you're happy with what you're doing and the parents of your kids are happy with it, you keep doing it." But, meanwhile, you look out there and you know that it's not good for a lot of kids. Let those people who want to try something else do it. Now, remember, I have to get elected to keep my job.

DIANE REHM: How long have you been in the job?

ALBERT SHANKER: I've been in for a long time. I've been national president since 1974 and I don't have any plans to leave.

So while these ideas are not accepted by all teachers, I think that most teachers realize how impossible their situation is, how they're getting blamed for a system which they didn't create and which puts impossible demands on them. I think a lot of them would love to create a new world in the schools.

QUESTION: I came in a little late on the program. I think Dr. Shanker was saying something about we shouldn't make kids feel like making mistakes is wrong and that we'll try to let fewer people see them make mistakes.

Could you clarify that for me? I didn't understand that.

DIANE REHM: He was telling us about the whole business of students being held up to ridicule. As one of our earlier callers said, every time she made a mistake in the classroom, the teacher made her feel that she was not a very good-thinking human being. But she has proven that she is very capable, very competent and that sort of thing.

QUESTION: Okay. I was just concerned that he was saying if you make a mistake, try and cover it up.

DIANE REHM: No, no, no.

ALBERT SHANKER: Oh, no. As a matter of fact, I think one of the best learning experiences for kids would be if they could see teachers make mistakes and guessing once in a while.

DIANE REHM: Exactly, and admit to it.

ALBERT SHANKER: Admit to it, but show that making mistakes

is part of the process of finding answers. If you're doing mathematics and the teacher is always pulling the magical answer out of his or her head, the kid will think it's magic: "I can never do this."

QUESTION: Mr. Shanker, Diane Rehm, I'm calling because I'm curious about whether or not the kinds of proposals Mr. Shanker is making have any relationship to the broader strategies for labor renovation that have been discussed in the labor movement, like the Committee on the Evolution of Work report. Is there a connection?

ALBERT SHANKER: You know, there sure is a connection. I think that if American workers are to make it and are to compete in the world, and if American unions are to be relevant in the world today -- which is a very different world than what it was 30 or 50 or 100 years ago -- I think unions, first of all, have to know their industry as well or better than management. Secondly, what we've got to offer management is that the employees trust us because we have fought for them, and I think that we can bring the involvement of large numbers of employees in a process of actually improving the process of productivity in the institution, just as Japanese workers do it with automobiles and just as the workers in the Saturn Project in GM and the automobile workers and the communications workers are doing the same in the telephone company.

Yes, it's a process of getting workers and their unions involved in improving the quality of the product and developing a different set of relationships with management, a set of cooperative relationships, moving away from the adversary

relationships that existed in the past.

DIANE REHM: What kinds of reactions do you get from the Administration, from the Secretary of Education, to begin with, in regard to your own ideas?

ALBERT SHANKER: He's very rigid and he's not a very good listener. He's got these slogans, and they're popular with some people.

One of the big things that's pretty obvious is that you can never bring people along if you have a feeling of hostility toward them. For instance, suppose a teacher in the classroom transmitted the idea that she or he really intensely disliked all the kids. You know what those kids would do to that teacher. They certainly wouldn't work for him or her.

What about your own kids in your own family if you, as a mother or father, were to give your own kids a feeling that you have this terrible dislike for them.

Now, you see, on the one hand we had Cap Weinberger. He raised the morale of the armed forces. He was fighting for them. He fought for budget; he fought for respect; he fought for a place. And he left the armed forces in a lot better shape than they were before he came in.

Bill Bennett, on the other hand, oozes this feeling that he dislikes everyone connected with education. He can't stand administrators or school boards or teachers or anybody else. How's he going to bring people along if they feel this guy's out to get us, or this guy really can't stand us? So there isn't really much point in even talking to him on these things. He has cut himself off.

DIANE REHM: What about the candidates you see in the field right now, Dr. Shanker? Do you see any more open-mindedness to the kinds of ideas you're talking about?

ALBERT SHANKER: It's too early to say. Both Dukakis and Jackson, and Bush, say they want to be known as education presidents, but so far they've not come forth with many educational ideas. There's still time. It's going to be a long campaign. I intend to meet with the candidates of both parties and to offer some of these ideas, and I hope that both sides will pick them up because I think education has become a bipartisan issue.

QUESTION: Hello. I've got two comments to make real quick.

I was in high school not too long ago and I dropped out. I got a GED and I'm going to college now. I'm also a member of MENSA. But the thing is, when I was going to high school, it was incredible; the people just didn't seem to care at all -- the students, that is. A few examples are: We had a citizenship test. It was supposedly a major deal in Howard County. The only two people who passed it were a foreign exchange student and myself. Everybody else seemed to fail it. Also, I was in a college prep English class and there were two people in there that could not read.

DIANE REHM: Well, these are the kinds of situations I guess you see all across the country, right, Dr. Shanker?

ALBERT SHANKER: You do see them, and I think another thing we've got to question is -- when I went to school, high school kids were still considered kids. Today, in terms of what kids know and what they've seen and what they've experienced, I

think the notion of confining a bunch of people to a building and a room for long periods of time -- and not just the sitting still and listening -- why not have more "schools without walls"? It's not true that the only way to learn is to sit here and listen to me talk. Why don't you go down to that courthouse downtown? Why don't you sit there during the day? Why don't you come back with a report as to what our system of justice is? What are some of the arguments that different lawyers use? What are some of the arguments the prosecution uses? I mean, there are other ways of learning.

In some school districts, half the kids are out of school every day because they can't stand the confinement. Why not use that? Why not say to these kids, "Look, you're mature. We trust you. There are a lot of interesting things in this town, in this community, in this city, places where you can go, people you can talk to, people you can interview. You can learn that way, too."

A lot of people throughout life say, "Well, I never really learned that in school. You know where I did learn it?" Well, why don't we look into our own lives and why don't we say, "Well, if you don't learn a lot of these things in school but do learn them in other places" -- here's a gentleman who dropped out. He's in MENSA. He's going to college. Why don't we make it easier for people to drop back in? Why don't we give them an alternative of a series of different ways of learning?

I think that's what we've got to do because what's there now, if it fits you, great; if it doesn't fit, stop blaming the kid because he didn't fit the system or the patient because the

pill didn't work. Try something different. Keep trying until you find something that works.

DIANE REHM: Good luck to you, sir. It's nice to have you here.

ALBERT SHANKER: Thank you. It was good to be here.

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