2022

T4PA CENTER

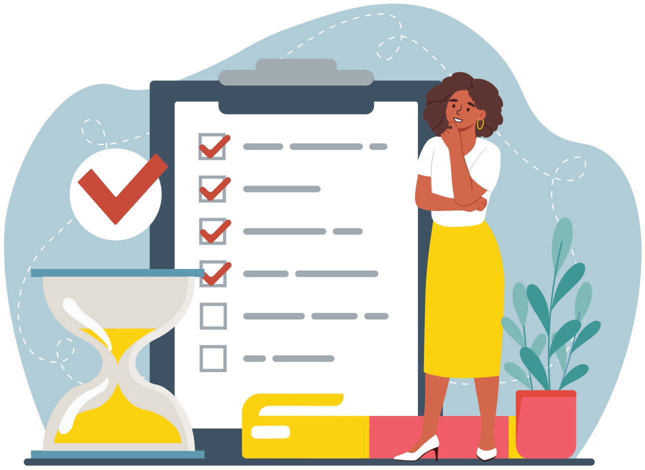
Assessing and Addressing Local Education Agency Needs

Contents

Introduction

Title IV, Part A (Title IV-A) State coordinators (SCs) are well versed in the fact that local education agency (LEA) plans and funding must be grounded in a comprehensive needs assessment, which must be conducted at least every 3 years. However, it may be less well understood that needs assessment is a useful practice at the State education agency (SEA) level, as well. Just as LEAs must assess and address needs across all their different schools, SEAs may find value in assessing and thinking about the best use of time and resources to address the various needs presented by LEAs.

As stewards for SEA Title IV-A allocations, SCs are responsible for deciding how to disseminate funds and support LEAs to effectively implement programming and activities that are aligned with the Title IV-A statute. Implicit in this is an assumption that SCs will be well informed about the needs identified by LEAs. While SCs may not have individual needs assessment data on hand for every LEA, they can gather and review information about the various priorities and needs based on LEA applications for funds and other communications from LEAs. The process of transforming this information into a state-level summary can be thought of as an SEA-level "needs assessment." This summative information can help SCs develop or articulate a rationale for their SEA's approach to disbursing and using Title IV-A funds.



This brief provides guidance for SCs on how to compile needs assessment and application data across their state (i.e., assess) and strategically distribute funds or plans accompanying training and technical assistance (T/TA) to maximize impact on schools and support equitable student outcomes (i.e., address).

The Statute

The Title IV-A statute requires LEAs to verify that, if receiving an award of $30,000 or greater, they have conducted a comprehensive needs assessment (Sec. 4106(d)(1)). The needs assessment process is intended to help LEAs determine which programs or activities they will propose in their funding applications.

The statute also explicitly addresses the role of SCs related to assessing needs and consolidating information from LEAs in two ways. First, SCs can use the state's reservation of funds for administrative costs to monitor and provide T/TA to their LEAs (Sec. 4104(b)(1)). The supports that SCs can provide range from T/TA related to the Title IV-A priority content areas (i.e., Well-Rounded Education, Safe and Healthy Students, and Effective Use of Technology) to T/TA on administrative activities, such as collaboration and coordination across other programs or stakeholder engagement. Second, SCs can collect and consolidate information reported by LEAs (including their needs, successes, choices of how to use funds, and goals for improvement) to meet public reporting requirements articulated in the statute (Sec. 4104(a)(2)).

Figure 1: Steps in the Needs Assessment Process

The Value of Assessing Needs at the State Level

Compiling and analyzing the information from LEAs' funding applications or other sources can help SEAs identify the areas where individual LEAs are facing specific challenges or cross-state patterns that may require state-level T/TA or investment, and then focus on desired outcomes as they implement their Title IV-A program. SCs can also think about state-level policy contexts, regulations, or strategic initiatives, while keeping in mind the range of LEA-reported needs, then work to identify T/TA, policy, or programming that will best serve both LEA and SEA objectives.

Steps for Assessing and Addressing Title IV-A Needs at the State Level

There are five steps inherent to any needs assessment process, whether formal or informal (see Figure 1): (1) get ready for the task, (2) gather your data, (3) identify and analyze needs, (4) interpret the information and reflect on what is driving those needs, and (5) select priority needs to be addressed in the short, medium, and long term. The following sections go into more detail for each of these steps.

Step 1: Get Ready

As part of preparing to take stock of needs across an SEA, SCs can either (1) decide on what areas to focus on in advance or (2) use available data to determine what to focus on. For the first option, it makes sense to predetermine topical "needs" when you already know there are statewide issues associated with one or more of the three Title IV-A priority areas (Well Rounded Education, Safe and Healthy Students, and/or Effective Use of Technology) or if there are new or existing state priorities that LEAs have not yet fully addressed. For example, if an SEA has just announced a statewide goal to reduce annual rates of suspensions and expulsions, this is an area of need to be addressed, regardless of whether LEAs have asked for funds or T/TA around this topic.

The second option is to deduce what LEAs need based solely on the information they provide. This option may be perceived as more responsive, as it is community driven and less "top down." This process will be described in depth in Step 3: Identify and Analyze Needs.

Another important aspect of preparing is figuring out what kinds of help may be needed to plan, collect, or review available data. SCs can lead or delegate this task; convene a team to work on it together; and develop a detailed plan outlining what is needed, from whom, and by when to inform statewide goal setting, funding cycles, T/TA activities, and other aspects of Title IV-A program implementation.

Step 2: Gather Data

Once an SC has articulated how he or she will approach looking at needs with a statewide perspective and who will help with that task, the next step is to identify data sources. Data sources might include

- LEAs' comprehensive needs assessments (if available)
- LEAs' applications for funding (Title IV-A specific, or consolidated applications)
- Monitoring visit notes
- Information received informally from LEAs
- Information from student, staff, or family surveys; focus groups; or workgroups
- State administrative data/report cards (e.g., with data on achievement, disciplinary actions, mental health service referrals, services to students with disabilities)
- Consolidated State Performance Reports
- Civil Rights Data Collection data
- Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance data

If any of these data sources are not available but seem potentially useful, it is okay to go back to Step 1. SCs should take the time to collect missing information as it will improve the likelihood of providing meaningful supports and activities to LEAs. SCs may receive limited information about the actual results from LEAs' comprehensive needs assessments, unless that information is requested during a monitoring event. Further, that level of detail may not be included in the application for Title IV-A funds — some states just ask LEAs to check a box saying that they did the needs assessments and that the results are informing the applications. This leaves only LEA funding applications as a reliable source of information about LEA needs — and this is a great place to start!

One way to organize the information shared in LEA applications (or other sources, if available) is around the Title IV-A priority areas and subtopics. Figure 2 shows the kinds of information that the T4PA Center-sponsored comprehensive needs assessment tool helps LEAs collect. An SEA might organize information from LEAs around these indicators or develop its own themes.

Also related to ensuring the utility of the data, consider data quality. SCs may have to use limited or incomplete data (i.e., whatever could be gleaned from LEAs or extracted from state dashboards). Be sure to disclose any limitations when sharing the summary of needs and recommended responses (see Step 5: Select Priorities to Address). Identifying data shortcomings presents an opportunity to ask for better data in future planning cycles.

Figure 2: Types of Needs or Activities LEAs May Report, by Title IV-A Priority Area and Subtopics

Well-Rounded Education	Safe and Healthy Students	Effective Use of Technology
		
• Supports to improve academic proficiency, which is measured for English language arts/literacy, math, science, and social studies • Efforts to promote equitable access and enrollment or participation across subjects/courses, including student participation in advanced coursework • Improved access and usage of educational supports, specifically libraries and college and career counseling	• Strategies to increase school engagement (e.g., reducing chronic absenteeism and dropout) • Examination of the proportionality of school disciplinary actions (e.g., out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, law enforcement referrals, and expulsions) • Implementation of measures of school climate and safety • Efforts to increase the availability of school-based service providers (e.g., school nurses, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and other personnel to coordinate services)	• Improved access to technology (i.e., making the Internet and devices for teaching staff and students more available) • Strategies to measure success around technology use (e.g., use of computerized assessments, blended learning, and online courses for credit recovery and advanced coursework) • Support for using technology (e.g., information technology staff, training/professional development [PD], and participation rates in trainings)

Figure 3: Sample Data Review Log

LEAs	Topic				
	Improving student-counselor ratios	Improving school climate	Reducing gang activity	Strengthening STE(A)M programming	Professional Development
District A		X	X		
District B	X	X			
District C			X		
District D	X		X		
District E				X	X
District F		X			
District G			X		

3. IDENTIFY AND ANALYZE NEEDS

Step 3: Identify and Analyze Needs

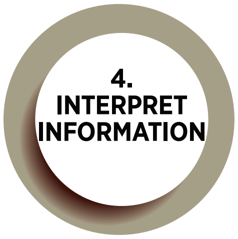
Next, figure out what the data say. Analyses can be elaborate or simple, depending on available resources and how the information will be used. SCs and their teams can follow these basic steps understand their data:

- Start by reviewing all the information (i.e., LEA funding applications, monitoring visit notes, information received informally from LEAs, etc.).
- Create lists, tables, or charts that log topics that arise from the data for each LEA (see Figure 3 above). Add a new list or column each time a new topic is encountered in the data.
- If concrete performance data are being examined, include the state benchmark[1] (if it exists), for comparison alongside LEA data.
- Create a short summary of the prevalence of different needs across the state. For example, based on the data in Figure 3, reducing gang activity was named as a need by the most LEAs (four), followed by improving school climate (three), and improving student-counselor ratios (two).

Conversely, another way to measure need is to recognize an absence of information on an identified issue or priority. For example, if an SEA is encouraging LEAs to use their Title IV-A funds to help staff learn to use a new statewide system for managing grades, assigning homework, and communicating with families (an Effective Use of Technology activity), the SC might notice a conspicuous absence of related PD opportunities in LEA applications for funds. This indicates a need to, at a minimum, check with the LEAs on what strategies they plan to use to ensure competency with the new system. The SC may need to inform the LEAs that a portion of their funding allocation may be used for this purpose.

Data analyses can also be more complex. For example, survey data can produce both descriptive statistics (summarizing the population who took the survey and percentages reporting different responses) and statistical significance testing (looking at differences by subgroups such as race-ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics). When possible, it is both more equitable and more useful when data are disaggregated (i.e., broken down) to look at different groups. Similarly, qualitative data (e.g., from focus groups or open-ended responses on surveys) can undergo thematic analyses to understand the nuances of what respondents shared. Research partners and trained evaluators can assist with this type of work.

Once analyses are completed, the findings can be used to inform the process described above of naming topical needs. For example, an annual survey may ask students if they feel safe outside the school building as they move around the school campus. For students reporting that they do not feel safe, an open-ended survey question can ask what specifically poses a threat. When looking at that data, reviewers can consider both the issues reported about safety and who is reporting them (e.g., by gender, age, or race/ethnicity).



Step 4: Interpret Information

Once the data have been reviewed and inventoried, the next step is to interpret what it all means, including thinking about what might be underlying the identified needs (see "Root Cause Analysis: Key Questions to Consider" on the next page). Begin by identifying initial questions or concerns revealed by the data and seeking more information if needed. Then articulate priorities and action steps for each issue or priority content area.

Interpretation might involve looking at the topics and trends in the data and coming up with a problem statement. For example, using the data in Figure 3, both gang reduction and school climate improvement were needs identified by multiple LEAs. This points to an overall issue in the area of Safe and Healthy Students. Since school climate and safety are generally accepted as precursors to staff's and students' ability to engage in academic content,[2,3] to verify this theory, look at student outcomes, such as grades, disciplinary data, attendance, etc. After a bit more reflection and exploration, the problem statement might be: "Six out of seven LEAs are spending their energies

Root Cause Analysis: Key Questions to Consider

A very important component of interpretation and reflection is considering what is driving various needs. A more formal approach to doing this is called a "root cause analysis".[4] At a minimum, SCs may want to consider these key questions:

- What resources, programs, practices, or policies are currently in place in affected LEAs?
- What resources, programs, practices, or policies may be missing that could better support schools, students, staff, or families, depending on the need?
- Which existing resources, programs, practices, or policies are not being leveraged to their full potential? Why is that the case?
- What community or environmental factors shape outcomes? Is geography a barrier?
- Which SEA or LEA programs or policies might affect how LEAs and schools perform?
- Anecdotally, what do stakeholders say they need?
- If outcomes are undesirable or vary across populations, what inequities exist? How can they be addressed?

The answers to these questions are essential to inform how SCs and SEAs will prioritize and address identified needs.

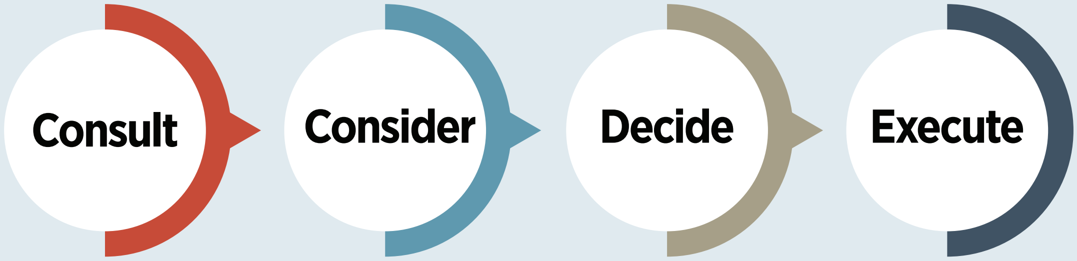
focused on climate and safety issues; this may be impacting student achievement as the seventh LEA, which is not dealing with these issues, has higher statewide achievement test scores on average."

Step 5: Select Priorities to Address

In a perfect world, there would be enough time, personnel, money, and other resources to address all needs. Unfortunately, that is rarely the case, so the next step is to select the highest priorities and begin to address them. This section will explain four components of prioritizing and addressing needs (see Figure 4 below): consulting with others on where to focus, considering what is entailed to address each need, deciding on final plans, and executing those plans.

Consult: No matter how confident an SC is about the information that has been compiled after

Figure 4: Four Components of Prioritizing and Addressing Identified Title IV-A Needs



the scan of cross-SEA needs, it is always a good idea to share and confirm prioritized needs with other stakeholders or decision-makers. This can include students, educators and other school staff, families, and community members, as well as those in leadership roles, ranging from superintendents to boards of education to state legislatures to working groups, etc. This will help others understand the data or agency priorities, invite their input about whether the correct issues have been prioritized, and get their buy-in on the overall strategy that will be employed.

Consider: Thinking next about the very specific issues and needs that have been identified as priorities, apply different lenses to these topics. This means to take the perspective of LEAs and those working closest to the issues. This will help inform the development of more useful and actionable plans to respond. SCs can consider the following reflective questions as they explore the best options to respond to identified needs.

- Is the problem related to administrative issues (e.g., quality of LEA needs assessment data, how funds are allocated and distributed, misuse of allocated funds, disengaged LEAs) or programming issues (e.g., do LEAs need help improving outcomes through curriculum, PD, a health program, or other direct supports)?
- Does addressing the need involve changes to policies, programs, and/or practices? Or extensive PD? Or something else?
- Using a multitiered and equity lens, do solutions need to be offered universally (to all LEAs, schools, staff, and students) or targeted to a specific subset of LEAs or types of schools, staff, or students? If a targeted solution is indicated, how will the intended recipients be identified, selected, and served?
- What, if any, current or new resources, supports, or programming will be needed to address each priority? Specifically, could any extant programming (within or across LEAs) be scaled up or shared? Could certain functions be incorporated into existing jobs or roles?
- Are there any topics where community- or state-level partnerships (e.g., with institutions of higher education, nonprofits) could be leveraged to take the burden off of LEAs?[5]
- What challenges might be encountered related to readiness and fit, at both the SEA and the LEA levels? Will broad SEA support be provided? Are staff prepared to take this on? Is the plan for how to address something a good fit for most or all LEAs, or might the plan need adjustment for some areas or groups? See Figure 5 below for resources to assist with this type of work.

Figure 5: Resources to Assess LEA or School Readiness and Fit for Taking on New Initiatives

When responding to identified needs, planning includes assessing the readiness of recipients to try something new. The following resources are available to support this process:

- Willing, Able-> Ready: Basics and Policy Implications of Readiness as a Key Component for Implementation of Evidence-Based Interventions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Human Services Policy)
- Stages of Implementation Analysis: Where Are We? (National Implementation Research Network)
- Active Implementation Hub (National Implementation Research Network)

- How might resource availability or capacity to implement changes vary by different LEA characteristics? For instance, LEAs that differ in terms of size, urbanicity, or socio-demographic makeup might have different interests or capacities to participate in proposed solutions. SCs may also need to think about having variations on plans for how any single issue might be addressed at different school levels (e.g., elementary, middle, high) or types (e.g., traditional public schools, magnet or charter schools, private schools).

Decide: Once priorities are confirmed and the multitude of factors that can affect successful plan implementation are considered, it is time to make a final decision about which needs will be prioritized and supported at the SEA level. If there are competing priority needs, decisions can be made based on availability of resources, whether the options to respond might happen in the short vs. long term, the likelihood of LEA buy-in and support, the realities of funding or staffing constraints, and so on.

When making difficult decisions with limited resources, the Urgent-Important Matrix

Figure 6: Eisenhower Matrix (Urgent-Important Matrix)

	Urgent	Less Urgent
Important		
Less Important		

(Eisenhower Matrix, n.d.; see Figure 6) may be a helpful tool. This well-known matrix helps prioritize tasks by urgency and importance (see above).

To use this matrix, distribute the list of identified needs in each of the four quadrants, then focus first on things in the *Urgent-Important* box, schedule time to address the *Less Urgent-Important* box later, delegate the *Urgent-Less Important* tasks, and do not spend time working on anything in the *Less Urgent-Less Important* box.

Execute: Once the highest priorities have been identified, the final step is to develop and execute specific state-level program implementation plans or T/TA opportunities to address the agreed-upon prioritized needs. Responding to needs at the state level might involve implementing a new policy, holding listening sessions, introducing or scaling up an evidence-based curriculum, providing new student supports, offering connections to more community-based resources, rolling out new technology, conducting a survey or evaluation, or facilitating communities of practice (CoPs), to name a few ideas.

Figure 7: What Are EBPs?

Section 8101(21)(A) of the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 defines an evidence-based intervention (i.e., an activity or strategy) as meeting one of four levels of evidence: strong, moderate, promising, or demonstration of a rationale. For more information on tiers of evidence and resources for selecting EBPs, see T4PA Center product *Selecting Evidence-Based Programs and Practices for Title IV, Part A Activities*.

If selecting a specific programmatic intervention to promote statewide, to the extent possible, Title IV-A encourages the use of evidence-based practices (EBPs) (Sec. 4104(b)(3)(B)(iii); see Figure 7 above for more information).

Each SEA may have a unique approach to implementing programs or activities intended to address identified priorities. Planning to execute an activity typically involves the following components, though not necessarily in the following order:

- Develop an implementation timeline, taking into account things that require advance planning.
- Obtain resources, including procuring or purchasing necessary materials or services and securing "people power" (e.g., contracting with consultants, hiring personnel, or developing agreements with community or other partners).
- Plan the delivery format (e.g., PD events, CoP meetings, coaching/consultation sessions, Webinars, delivery of physical materials, student convenings, funding disbursement channels).
- Assign the different components of the work that needs to be done. An effective way to make sure the right people are doing or know about the work is to use the RACI model. RACI stands for Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed. Each word describes a different role that a team member might play in the accomplishment of a task.
- Inform stakeholders about what to expect, why it is happening (i.e., the reason and the potential benefit to them), and when it will be rolled out. Stakeholders include leaders (e.g., the state superintendent, legislators, partners such as other Title program coordinators) and those who will be included in various activities and interventions (e.g., LEAs, school boards, school staff, families, and student groups).
- Develop a plan to assess satisfaction with or impact of SEA-led activities.

If planning to address identified needs through providing T/TA, consider the following questions:

- Who is your target audience?
- When are they available to receive T/TA?
- What mode or format is most likely to garner high participation and engagement?
- How much time is needed for the T/TA to be effective? An hour? A day? More? And is one session satisfactory? Will the T/TA be more effective if it is provided in installments over a period of time?
- Which personnel or consultants will provide the T/TA? Are they qualified to address the content?
- How will success of the T/TA be assessed? (I.e., how will anyone know whether it made a difference?)

Finally, after all this careful planning, it is time to execute! Implement the programming or T/TA secure in the knowledge that many very important aspects and perspectives have been considered, and the chances that the response to identified needs will be successful are high!

Do not forget to take time to intentionally reflect on successes, challenges, lessons learned, and (if available) outcomes data associated with activities aimed at addressing LEAs needs. These observations can be used to plan for future funding and programming cycles.

Paying It Forward — Helping LEAs Effectively Address Their Needs Assessment Findings

SCs might notice that some LEAs lack a good understanding of how to assess and address needs at the district level. If this is the case, SCs can share, model, or help LEAs replicate the process outlined in this resource to help them identify priorities and strategize how to respond. In addition to passing on the information presented above, consider providing some or all the following supports to LEAs:

- Help LEAs examine and improve data availability or quality to benefit their own planning (which will in turn benefit SEA-level planning). Specifically, talk about how to get more information when formal data are lacking. Finding data for subpopulations (e.g., racial/ethnic groups, students with differential learning or language abilities, school support staff) may be especially challenging. If this is the case, SCs can advise LEAs to use qualitative methods to get targeted input — including focus groups, interviews, surveys, or "town halls" with students, staff, or families — on educational topics or issues that may be experienced differently by various populations.
- Model or showcase what data-informed planning looks like. This might include sharing information about SEA activities to collect and review data, or spotlighting exemplar LEAs doing a good job with their data, stakeholder engagement, and planning.
- Create opportunities to practice. For example, SCs could provide scenarios with mock data, asking LEA staff to identify issues and discrepancies, devise solutions to the challenges, and consider the inputs and time frame needed to actualize the solutions.
- Facilitate planning discussions or CoPs across LEAs, prompting them to think creatively (i.e., "outside the box"). Challenge participants to consider new and useful programming or interventions; how to differentiate supports for schools with different needs; and how to prioritize multiple, competing needs with limited resources (see Figure 6).
- Remind LEAs to leverage existing school improvement plans or Title I plans, building on data review and other work already done to assess and respond to LEA needs and priorities.
- Suggest that LEAs examine whether they might blend or braid funds from different sources[6] to accomplish their goals.

After providing information and supports to LEAs, follow up periodically to check on how things are going. Ask LEAs about their progress toward realizing goals and confirm that any selected activities are aligned with identified needs. Also, ask LEAs to think about how they will monitor or measure progress toward addressing those needs. Using the RACI model, SCs can ask LEAs to keep them on the "Informed" list; information shared by LEAs allows SCs to keep tabs on LEAs' various needs, and successes, on a continuous basis.

Closing

In conclusion, this brief is intended to help SCs take a cross-cutting view of needs across their SEA and and the progress of their LEAs' work. A thorough and comprehensive process to assessing needs at the state level can help justify and support effective disbursement of Title IV-A funds. The steps and activities described above will help SCs do their job more effectively and provide a clear rationale for decisions made at the SEA level. This brief can also be used to help LEAs assess and address needs, either individually or across LEAs. Specifically, SCs can serve as role models and mentors to LEAs engaged in a parallel process of responding to identified priorities. Importantly, assessing and addressing needs is a long-term, potentially cyclical process (assess, address, reassess, adjust priorities, repeat). By committing to a thoughtful, state-level practice of assessing and addressing needs, SCs can facilitate meaningful, positive impacts on schools and equitable student outcomes.

END NOTES

[1] Definition: A benchmark is a data point (count, percentage, rate, ratio, score, cut point, etc.) that can serve as a point of comparison for schools in an SEA of LEA.

[2] For more information and resources: National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (n.d.). *School climate improvement.* https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate-improvement

[3] Harper, K. (2022). *Serving all students: Promoting a healthier, more supportive school environment.* Child Trends, Washington DC. https://www.childtrends.org/publications/serving-all-students-promoting-a-healthier-more-supportive-school-environment

[4] For more information: Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2020). *Purposes of root cause analysis in school improvement planning*; or National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (2015). *Addressing the root causes of disparities in school discipline: An educator's action planning guide*.

[5] For more information: T4PA Center. (2021). Developing stakeholder relationships to support school programming.

[6] For more information: T4PA Center. (2021). Braiding funds to enhance Title IV-A program efficiency and outcomes.

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