

**SERIES:** Caucus: New Jersey with Steve Adubato  
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STEVE ADUBATO, host:

New approaches to improving literacy, next on CAUCUS NEW JERSEY.

Announcer: Funding for this edition of CAUCUS NEW JERSEY has been provided by Johnson & Johnson, the worldwide health care products company; New Jersey Natural Gas, proud to support education in our communities; and QualCare Inc., a local managed care company covering 600,000 New Jersey residents.

PAULA M. LEVINE reporting:

Imagine a Web site where a teacher can get lesson plans free of charge, a place where your kids can log on safely, an innovative way to deal with low literacy in urban settings. If you can imagine all of this, you've just imagined Thinkfinity.

Ms. THERESA GIBBON ("Thinkfinity" Trainer): Thinkfinity is a portal that provides teachers, parents, students access to a collection of databases that have educational resources. So if, for example, you are searching for a lesson on dinosaurs and you search dinosaurs, it will go out to many different databases and look for all the lessons that are available on dinosaurs and bring them back to a central location so that you can look through a variety of resources rather than a single subject matter resource.

LEVINE: Even better, there are lesson plans that are age-appropriate as well as being aligned with state standards. And each one gives an overview of the lesson, the materials needed for it, the objectives and the estimated time to complete it.

For John Kline, New Jersey Teacher of the Year and father of three, Thinkfinity addresses a variety of concerns.

Mr. JOHN E. KLINE (New Jersey "Teacher Of The Year"): As a seventh and eighth grade social studies teacher, there's so much information on the Internet. If you google something, you're going to hit millions and millions and millions of topics and you'll have more information than you could ever look at in your lifetime. And Thinkfinity's done a lot of the work for you.

As a father of three young daughters, mostly I'm concerned about them surfing sort of wildly on the Web. You never know what topic they're going to run into. And so Thinkfinity's a safe Web site that my children can go to, find the information that they need, accesses--and access it quickly, and it saves me the trouble of having to worry.

LEVINE: More than that, it works for all of their grade levels. Eleven-year-old Jacqueline can work on geometry problems, while nine-year-old Madison is learning to write poetry and seven-year-old Hannah is learning about different animals. But best of all, it comes from reliable sources.

Ms. GIBBON: You have National Geographic providing geography lessons. You have Edge providing fine arts lessons. There's also the Literacy Network. The Literacy Network targets specific programs and plans to help teachers

improve their literacy instruction. There are actually 55,000 lessons there waiting for you to just pick and choose the ones that work for your kids. So it's complete.

Mr. KLINE: They think it's cool, you know, they think it's a great way to learn. I mean, imagine somebody saying to them go sit on your cell phone and do your homework, or go sit at your computer and do your homework. I mean, that's something that they can access--that they would enjoy doing anyway, and now they're actually learning while they're doing it.

ADUBATO: Welcome to this very special edition of CAUCUS NEW JERSEY. I'm Steve Aduato. Joining me here in the studio to examine how new approaches to learning are improving literacy skills among urban youth are Barbara Rodriguez, who is a mom, also a basic literacy student with the Literacy Volunteers of Mercer County, New Jersey; Laura Ingoglia edits the NJPAC, that's the New Jersey Performing Arts Center Teachers Resource Guide; Karen Warner is the New Jersey coordinator for Thinkfinity, based in the East Brunswick Public School District; and finally, our good friend Dennis Bone, president of Verizon New Jersey, an organization with a very long and distinguished history of supporting literacy initiatives.

I want to thank all of you for joining us.

We're talking about Thinkfinity, a whole range of other issues connected to literacy and illiteracy. By the way, throughout this entire program you're going to see our Web site up. Please, we use technology to try to drive you watching television more information.

(Graphic on screen)

[www.caucusnj.org](http://www.caucusnj.org)  
Literacy Online Resource Center

ADUBATO: Dennis, let me ask you, why are you even involved in this? How--I always tell my students in journalism, don't ask more questions than one, but I'm asking myself why you're involved and how big is the problem?

Mr. DENNIS BONE (President, Verizon New Jersey): Well, the problem is huge and frankly, that's why we are involved. You know, literacy is, you know, such a huge challenge to society moving forward, you know, in our urban areas, and all of our areas are, you know, our demographics are changing. Just a lot of literacy issues. People can't read, write, they can't read to their kids, they can't get a job in some cases and it just undermines society.

ADUBATO: Let's define it. See, the term literacy or illiteracy is thrown out, or low literacy, these terms are thrown out a lot. Can we get a clear, simple definition? By the way, we'll put this on our Web site so you can understand it. Do we have a clear understanding of what these terms mean? Illiteracy is?

Ms. LAURA INGOGLIA (Editor, NJPAC Teacher's Resource Guides): I would say it's not being able to read.

ADUBATO: Read and/or write?

Ms. INGOGLIA: Read and/or write clearly, legibly, concisely.

ADUBATO: At what--OK. But say you're in fourth--go ahead, take a shot.

Mr. BONE: I just take a little bit of a broader view. I think it's not being able to fully function in society. I mean, if you have to--you know, to get a driver's licences, you have to read a driver's manual and go take a driver's test. Then, you know, if you can't do that, then, you know, you're held back in society. You can't get that licence.

ADUBATO: So you're not literate to the degree you need to to function in society.

Mr. BONE: Right. Or get a job or participate in some online activity or whatever it is.

ADUBATO: Let's look at the numbers. I'm blown away, Dennis. It's not the first program we've done on this subject, but I still am amazed. Fifty million Americans can't read above the sixth grade level. Ninety percent of all juvenile offenders are illiterate.

Laura Jones, our producer, what was that number? Two million--two million in New Jersey cannot read? Does that make sense? Is that possible? Is it--those numbers are accurate.

Ms. KAREN WARNER (Middlesex County Educational Technology Training Center; East Brunswick Public Schools): It's very hard to believe, but I know when I started teaching a long time ago, I went to a workshop on how to teach children how to read and I thought, 'OK, the problem's going to be fixed.' But now many years later, I'm going to the same conferences and the problem is not fixed.

ADUBATO: I want to talk to you, Barbara, because you--first of all, you get big points for coming on, and I have a feeling you're going to make a big difference in the lives of many. A little bit about your story. You graduated, or you got out of school in what grade?

Ms. BARBARA RODRIGUEZ (Basic Literacy Student): In ninth grade.

ADUBATO: When you were in the ninth grade, you could read at what level?

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Maybe the third, fourth.

ADUBATO: When you're in the ninth grade, got out of school, you could read at the third or fourth grade level. Your teachers did what when that was happening?

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Basically nothing. Just give you a work sheet, if you completed it, then that was it. Or just read a book.

ADUBATO: You told our producers that your teachers, quote, "covered" for you.

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Covered for me. You mean when I didn't show up to school and things like that? They skipped me.

ADUBATO: We'll put it this way, you weren't--excuse me, I interrupted you. They skipped you?

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Yeah.

ADUBATO: They moved you through.

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: To the next grade. But that was in junior high, in middle school.

ADUBATO: How is it--Barbara represents lots of--tens, hundreds of thousands of students out there. And I don't want to put this on teachers exclusively, we're all involved. We'll talk about parents in a minute. If a kid can't read in the ninth grade, or is reading at the third or fourth grade level, what's supposed to happen? What should happen? Dennis:

Mr. BONE: What should happen is there should be some accountability to go back and pick up that student where they are and help them learn to read and help them to advance.

ADUBATO: And when that doesn't happen, what are the implications? What is the impact on society? Because Thinkfinity is one of the many initiatives out there. We're going to talk about what makes it different, as we saw on the taped piece. But what are the--what is the impact of people graduating or moving through school unable to function in society? What's the impact?

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: It's--I don't know. I have girlfriends that--one girlfriend, actually, that went to school with me, she graduated by just going to school every day, but she doesn't know how to read or do math or anything. They just gave it to her, I guess.

ADUBATO: What else happens? What impact are we talking about? How...

Mr. BONE: It undermines society. I mean, when you think about, you know, our economic future and things like that.

ADUBATO: Right.

Mr. BONE: We have individuals who simply aren't prepared to, you know, to contribute to, you know, to help themselves or to help companies.

ADUBATO: What impact does it have on companies?

Mr. BONE: Oh, it has a huge impact. I mean, it makes--it makes our competitiveness--it makes us less competitive. It adds expense, it decreases productivity. I mean, you can measure all sorts of things about an unproductive work force.

ADUBATO: Now let's talk about what works, what doesn't. By the way, log on to our Web site. You'll find out more about Thinkfinity. Verizon's been our partner for a long time in this initiative.

But I'm curious about this, Laura, poetry as it relates to literacy. Explain this to us.

Ms. INGOGLIA: Yeah. Well, NJPAC has a young writers...

ADUBATO: New Jersey Performing Arts Center.

Ms. INGOGLIA: Yes. Yes.

ADUBATO: We're taping right across the street from that beautiful facility.

Ms. INGOGLIA: Right.

ADUBATO: Go ahead.

Ms. INGOGLIA: We have a young writer's workshop residency program, and in this program professional artists go into the classrooms, they deal with students between the ages of seven and 18. They explain different literary devices...

ADUBATO: Give us a for instance.

Ms. INGOGLIA: ...writing styles. Well, one of the basic things that they do in the classroom is help children write poetry. And so they go over different styles of poetry, concepts that the children can express. They let the children use their own emotions, their own experiences and they help the children put that in poetry form, sometimes stories. And it's wonderful, because the children learn critical thinking, they learn concentration and focus, they learn how to organize their thoughts.

ADUBATO: What does that have to do with literacy?

Ms. INGOGLIA: It gives them the confidence to express themselves both verbally and in writing. And as they feel more comfortable writing, they can keep improving their academic achievement. They can--they can keep expanding their horizons.

ADUBATO: It builds confidence as well.

Ms. INGOGLIA: It does. Confidence and self-image.

ADUBATO: Karen, let me ask you this. With the Thinkfinity Initiative, give us a--I'm into concrete examples, because my sense is that people learn largely anecdotally and they--'Oh, that's what you're talking about.' In the East Brunswick schools, where you are--you head up the Thinkfinity initiative, right?

Ms. INGOGLIA: Yes.

ADUBATO: In New Jersey. Give us a concrete for instance as to how the Thinkfinity initiative works in the East Brunswick public schools, a real-life situation.

Ms. WARNER: OK. In East Brunswick public schools, I'm the supervisor of the Middlesex County Educational Technology Training Center.

ADUBATO: Is that all on your business card?

Ms. WARNER: All on the card. It all fits in on that little card. And there is an educational technology center in every county in New Jersey. So we are all responsible for disseminating all the good news about Thinkfinity. So we conduct trainings. We have educators come to our center, we conduct trainings all over the state. If anybody calls us, we go.

ADUBATO: OK. But I'm trying to get down to what really happens.

Ms. WARNER: OK. So here's the concrete example. I was in the Black River Middle School, and I always give a concrete example. I say, 'OK, what do you want to search for?' And one teacher said, 'Critique of art.' I said, 'OK, that's a good one, I've never tried it.' Typed it in, up came a whole bunch of sites, as you saw in the movie, and the teacher gasped. I said--she said, 'Can you click on that second one?' I said, 'OK.' She said, 'I spent an all day looking for that site and you brought it up in three seconds.'

ADUBATO: So wait a minute, is--Dennis, is it taking advantage of existing technology in order to facilitate learning and literacy?

Mr. BONE: Existing technology. More important, existing content, again, that is tied to teacher's standards. So if you are a teacher, you can go online, click on--this morning I did one, I did northern lights. I used to be a science teacher a long time ago, so I...

ADUBATO: Hold on. Give people a sense of your background. The atypical CEO background. We always talk about this.

Mr. BONE: I was a math and science teacher for five years.

ADUBATO: So you admit that.

Mr. BONE: Yes, I do. The happiest time in my life in terms of self-esteem and gratification.

ADUBATO: Yes.

Mr. BONE: It was tremendous. So I typed in northern lights. A whole bunch of lesson plans came up. And I typed in, I think, six to eighth--sixth to eighth grade, and I got immediately to a northern lights lesson plan that was laid out, it had stuff from the Web that you could click on, stuff to read, discussion points, all sorts of things for teachers. And I mean, I just imagine being a science teacher with this--with this aid. And the great thing is the content are brought to you by the best educational organizations in the country.

ADUBATO: Yeah. Play that out a little bit, because some folks might think, 'Oh, so there are people over at Verizon who sit there and plug this stuff in.' No, that's not what happens. What happens?

Mr. BONE: No. When we developed Thinkfinity, we said, 'OK, geography. What's the best organization in the country, from our point of view, that could help develop geography lessons? How about National Geographic?' So we go give National Geographic a major grant to do content and to bring geography lessons into Thinkfinity. And we did this with many, many, many organizations. We did it with New Jersey PAC, for example.

ADUBATO: Partnerships.

Mr. BONE: Yeah.

ADUBATO: So partnerships are key to this initiative.

Mr. BONE: Mm-hmm.

ADUBATO: OK, Laura, I'm going to bring you back in.

Ms. INGOGLIA: Yeah.

ADUBATO: But Barbara, I'm going to ask you something. You listen to Dennis talk about how he went in and did the northern lights thing, and we're listening to Karen, and technology is a great resource. How did you make these dramatic improvements so that you are now, in fact, a basic literacy student with Literacy Volunteers? I mean, you're also helping others. How did you make your improvement?

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Well, years ago I tried to go for my GED, and I took the pretest and I failed the reading comprehension part. And one of the teachers there had given me the number to the American Literacy Program, and I've been with them for two years so far.

ADUBATO: You have improved two grade levels.

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Mm-hmm.

ADUBATO: Already. What does that feel like?

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: It feels great. I want to keep going forward.

ADUBATO: Do you realize you're now on a public television show that is seen by millions across the East Coast right now?

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

ADUBATO: Does that make you nervous?

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, of course.

ADUBATO: That was not my intent. Not my intent. But isn't that kind of interesting? Like, you go from saying, you know--you know, you're in ninth grade but with a third or fourth grade level, now you're here on public television doing this. You should be--I know you're proud of yourself.

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Yeah.

ADUBATO: And we are, as well.

Talk about the whole question of parents, because I'm curious. We've been talking about teachers, and a teacher had an impact on your life.

You were talking about the teachers, OK?

You were talking as a former science teacher. Curious, the role of parents. Say parents watching right now, or a student somewhere. Parents and/or students, how do they access Thinkfinity and make it work for them, separate and apart? We happen to be doing this program in the summer, you'll see it in the fall. In the summer, teacher's not around. What do they do?

Ms. WARNER: Thinkfinity thought of that.

Ms. INGOGLIA: Mm-hmm.

ADUBATO: Go ahead.

Ms. WARNER: There's a tab for parents and caregivers.

Ms. INGOGLIA: Hm.

Ms. WARNER: And they had a separate section for summer activities. There's great help for how to read to your children. There's a whole bunch of podcasts parents can listen to.

ADUBATO: Right there--by the way, what is the Thinkfinity site right now?

Ms. WARNER: Thinkfinity.org.

ADUBATO: By the way, that means that it's a nonprofit. Log on to Thinkfinity--as we are. Log on to thinkfinity.org as you--right now, as you're watching us right now. I know our Web site is up. Thinkfinity.org, log on to it and what happens?

Ms. WARNER: You'll see the beautifully recently redesigned Thinkfinity Web page. You can click right on the tab that says parents and everything will be laid out there just like a set table.

ADUBATO: What about if a parent has serious literacy problems?

Go ahead. What do you think?

Ms. INGOGLIA: Well, I would assume that Thinkfinity can help them, as well.

ADUBATO: Not just Thinkfinity, the larger question. The parent has literacy problems.

Ms. INGOGLIA: Hm.

ADUBATO: We're talking about the student, the child, but the parent has serious problems. How the heck do you make that work?

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Look for help. Go to public school and see if--ask information. Go to the library.

ADUBATO: But isn't it a fact that with immigrants sometimes, for whom English is a serious challenge, the English language, that it is the child who drives the parent to make a difference?

Ms. INGOGLIA: Mm-hmm.

ADUBATO: Am I getting that wrong, Dennis?

Mr. BONE: No. Adult literacy is just a huge, huge, huge challenge for us to work with. Yeah, a lot of times it's the child reaching back to the parent. But in many cases, in my experience, there's a tension there. The parents are very uneasy, you know. They can't help their son or daughter with their homework.

ADUBATO: Right.

Mr. BONE: They can't help them with school. Maybe they don't want to go to parents' night because, you know, they're uncomfortable in that situation.

ADUBATO: Embarrassed.

Mr. BONE: Yeah, embarrassed, exactly. So you know, adult literacy is an area where literacy volunteers and other organizations, you know, are doing a wonderful job. But this is an area where the need is so much greater than the resources that are being put towards solving that need.

ADUBATO: Let's talk about this larger question. To what degree is corporate America, is the United States of America acknowledging this? Because I would say, Dennis, this--we're going on four or five years that we've been doing this.

Mr. BONE: Mm-hmm.

ADUBATO: You know, with our colleague Sam Delgado over at Verizon. We've been talking about this back and forth, back and forth. But the numbers don't seem to be going down. Am I missing something, that we're making improvements, but there are more people who identified as literate or illiterate or low literacy citizens? I mean, why are we not making more improvements here? You've got a terrific initiative over at NJPAC. You've got it going. You've--you're making progress, but the numbers aren't changing. I guess my question is, is this a national crisis that we acknowledge as a national crisis?

Mr. BONE: I don't think we acknowledge it, frankly. And I think that changing demographics are part of the issue of why the issue never seems to be, you know, really resolved.

ADUBATO: Why not? What do you think's missing here? I mean, how much more do people need to see that millions of Americans are not functioning, whether it's with the driver's licence or the ability to read a sign or all sorts of things, in terms of just being able to get employed? I guess these are larger policy questions that we'll deal with.

Let me come back to you, Laura.

Ms. INGOGLIA: Mm-hmm.

ADUBATO: Talk a little bit about your initiative. The most rewarding thing about the work that you do over at NJPAC is?

Ms. INGOGLIA: Well, one of my main jobs at NJPAC is editing the teacher resource guides. And these are booklets that accompany each of our schooltime performances. It helps the teacher prepare the student for the performance, what's going to be on stage, who the artists are, vocabulary words, glossary words that relate to the particular media, whether it be dance, music or theater. Then we always have a section called "Did You Know" that picks up on the custom, culture or social force aspect related to the performance.

ADUBATO: That's a little jargony, social force aspect. What does that mean?

Ms. INGOGLIA: Well, you know, so it's more of an academic. For example, we had Philadanco perform, and they--the dance company from Philadelphia.

ADUBATO: Right.

Ms. INGOGLIA: And they performed one of their masterpieces, "Southern Landscape."

ADUBATO: So what's the resource guide give you?

Ms. INGOGLIA: So the resource guide--"Southern Landscape" is about the end of the reconstruction period after the Civil War. As the reconstruction period came to a close, there were many aspects of it that end up affecting people.

ADUBATO: I'm--time's a little bit of an issue.

Ms. INGOGLIA: Sorry.

ADUBATO: I just wonder--what's the--what's the--what's the resource guide give them?

Ms. INGOGLIA: So we had an essay about the reconstruction period so the teacher could present that to her students.

ADUBATO: So it's another guide, another resource for educators.

Ms. INGOGLIA: But we also have before and after activities, and that's where Thinkfinity comes in. In over half of our guides this past season we referred teachers to Thinkfinity sites to help them.

ADUBATO: Oh, drive them to get more information.

Ms. INGOGLIA: To get more information.

ADUBATO: Is that the way it works?

Ms. WARNER: Absolutely.

ADUBATO: Just getting people--kids curious.

Ms. WARNER: Absolutely.

ADUBATO: Hey, find out more. Is that what it is? That's half the battle.

Ms. WARNER: Absolutely. Example: Ezra Jack Keats, great author of children's books. You type Ezra Jack Keats into Thinkfinity, you have a whole slew of lesson plans. You have a wonderful Web site. There's one book, "A Snowy Day," you can make a snowflake online, an animated snowflake. You can save it on the Web, you can share it with your friends. You can have background information about Ezra Jack Keats. You have, you know, everything, you know, one click away.

ADUBATO: Excuse me. As you're talking about this, log on to our site to get more information about this. Are you saying that most of educators in our public schools are aware of this resource and are utilizing this resource? Because, you know, people are salivating, saying, 'What a minute, I want that for my kid.' Is that fair to say?

Ms. WARNER: We are working--we are working on that. Because it's always shocking how many people aren't aware of Thinkfinity.

ADUBATO: There are a fair number of educators watching right now who are saying, 'Hm, I didn't know about that.' That's disconcerting.

Ms. WARNER: It is. It is. We're working very hard. We're going to be at the NJEA.

ADUBATO: New Jersey Education Association.

Ms. WARNER: New Jersey--you got it, you got it.

ADUBATO: We partner with them on a lot of issues.

Ms. WARNER: Yes.

ADUBATO: So if the NJEA, New Jersey Education Association...

Ms. WARNER: And they partner--they are partnering with us.

ADUBATO: OK, but they're the organization, the professional association. They have to drive it down to the actual educators, right? And they're being inundated with lots of stuff. But this is a valuable tool.

I'm going to come back to you, Barbara. We have about two and a half minutes left. What's your message to people watching right now who may be struggling themselves, or their child or their children are struggling to learn the language, to become literate, to become a functioning citizen? What would you say to them?

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Look for help. Go to--call the American Literacy Program or seek help. Look on the Web site. Ask a friend.

ADUBATO: Ask a friend.

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Yeah.

ADUBATO: What's it done for you?

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Helped me out a lot with the reading and there for my child.

ADUBATO: How old--your child is?

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: I have a 10-year-old and a three-month-old.

ADUBATO: So your children will have a better shot than you had.

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, of course. Yeah.

ADUBATO: Dennis, got a couple of minutes left. What's the message for other corporate executives out there?

Mr. BONE: Corporate--got to get involved. I mean, you've got to see the long-term situation here to make life better for our society, for the communities we live in. We have to invest in those nagging social problems that pull us back.

ADUBATO: And do what, though? Do we need more volunteers? What do we need from corporate America? Let's be specific.

Mr. BONE: We need--we need across the board commitment. And by that I mean, resources to fund the adult literacy programs, for example; volunteers, awareness, partnerships. I mean, partnerships are a great way to do this, like the partnership that Verizon has with the New Jersey Performing Arts Center or with the Middlesex School System. Those are some of the best areas.

ADUBATO: So if a corporate executive were to say, 'Wait, that's--you know, this is really, it is a problem, but it's not our problem. It's the problem of the public school system.' You say?

Ms. WARNER: I say it's everybody's problem.

ADUBATO: It is ours, isn't it?

Mr. BONE: Mm-hmm.

ADUBATO: It's public television's problem, it's the public school system's problem, it's corporate America's problem, it's the nonprofit's problem, it's the problem of citizens.

Thirty seconds left. Reasons to be hopeful here. Reasons to be hopeful. Let's throw it out. Reasons to be hopeful that a year from now, two years from now, we do this program and we've made real progress. Go ahead.

Ms. WARNER: I think here's a reason to be hopeful.

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Yeah.

ADUBATO: So Barbara is a reason to be hopeful.

Ms. WARNER: I think she's a great example.

ADUBATO: Reasons to be hopeful, go ahead, real quick.

Ms. INGOGLIA: I think there are--there are many other programs out there that can help students and teachers. There's Thinkfinity, there are--there's--Celebrate New Jersey has a great literacy program for free.

ADUBATO: All free, by the free.

Ms. INGOGLIA: All free.

ADUBATO: I want to clarify that, folks. Everything we're talking about is free.

Ms. INGOGLIA: (Unintelligible)...yes.

ADUBATO: Right, Dennis?

Mr. BONE: Yes. Everything is free.

Ms. INGOGLIA: Yes.

ADUBATO: Everything is free.

Ms. WARNER: Yeah.

ADUBATO: This is free public television, but don't forget to, you know, pledge. Thanks a lot.

Announcer: If you would like more information on this program or if you'd like to express an opinion, e-mail us at [info@caucusnj.org](mailto:info@caucusnj.org) and visit us online at [caucusnj.org](http://caucusnj.org).

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