



FAQ: Superintendents in Pennsylvania School Districts

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Introduction

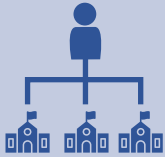



A superintendent is the Chief Administrative Officer, the highest-ranking leader, of a school district. Each year several of Pennsylvania's 500 school districts experience a transition or change in their superintendent and currently Pennsylvania's two largest school districts—Philadelphia and Pittsburgh—are both undergoing a search for a new superintendent to begin next school year. Despite how important these leaders are in charting the trajectory of school district operations and ultimately of student learning, relatively little research has been published about Pennsylvania's superintendents. This document summarizes existing research and state policy and provides original analysis of available data to answer some frequently asked questions about superintendents. The goal of this FAQ is to inform school and community members hoping to get involved in superintendent searches in their school districts.

What are the roles and responsibilities of superintendents?

A superintendent operates the local public school system as directed by the school district's board of directors. Like the chief executive of any organization, the specific roles and responsibilities of a superintendent vary based on the characteristics of the organization, or in this case the school district local education agency (LEA). The leadership style of an individual superintendent can also impact how responsibilities are handled. Geographic and demographic contexts also influence the role. For example, superintendents in large urban districts with high poverty rates [may face higher pressure](#) to improve student test scores or overcome more severe budget deficits. They also may operate in a political space that differs significantly from superintendents in suburban or rural districts, which are often smaller but spread out over a larger geography.

Despite these varied contextual factors, [Section 1081](#) of the PA School Code outlines a uniform set of expectations for all superintendents. For example, the law grants all superintendents the right to attend and speak at board meetings, but not the right to vote. [Regulations](#) from the State Board of Education provide further detail. Together Pennsylvania's expectations for superintendents generally align with national research. Below in Table 1, we categorize four critical components of the superintendent role (district management, finance, decision-making, and community engagement) and summarize key responsibilities associated with each.

Table 1: Summary of Research on the Roles and Responsibilities of Superintendents

Category	Example responsibilities and tasks
 District Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reports to the board of school directors about status of schools.• Hires, supervises, and manages district-level senior staff and school leaders.• Ensures compliance with state and federal policies and benchmarks.• Conducts classroom observations and site visits.• Sets professional development expectations.
 Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prepares the annual budget.• Analyzes spending data to determine costs and benefits of district spending.
 Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Outlines a vision or strategic plan for the district to improve or overcome specific challenges. (For example, a strategic plan may target closing the opportunity gap or improving discipline policies. Here is a strategic plan from Pittsburgh Public Schools.)• Determines educational programming. (For example, the superintendent may lead efforts to provide students 1:1 electronic devices or invest in a new reading program.)
 Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provides policy recommendations to the school board and other officials in local and state government and supports policy implementation.• Communicates district progress and challenges to the broader community.• Collaborates with board and other interested parties, including teacher or other labor unions.

Do charter schools have superintendents?

No. Charter school LEAs are led by a chief executive officer (CEO), which can be any “individual appointed by the board of trustees to oversee and manage the operation of the charter school.” 24 Pa. Stat. § 17-1703-A.

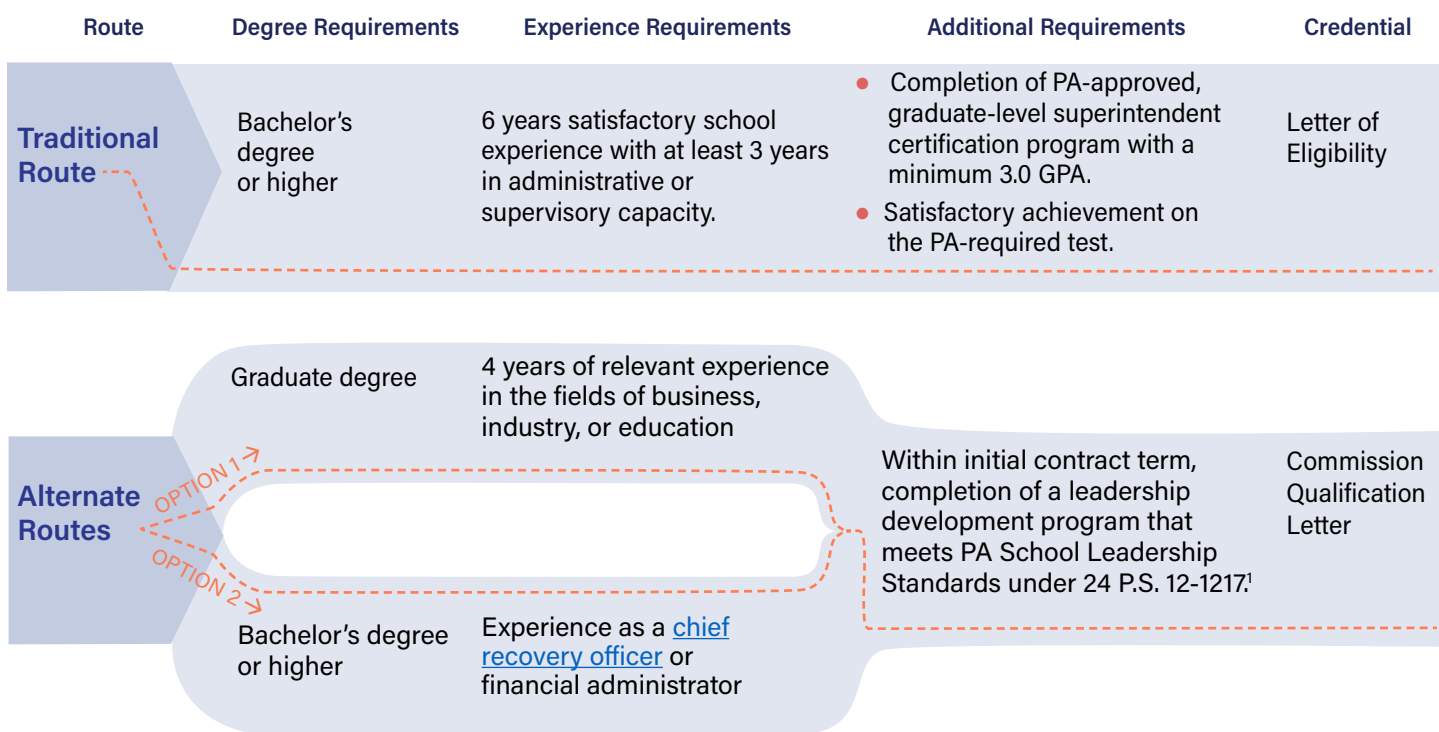
The charter school law requires no credentialing, experience, or training for a charter school CEO. However, [guidance](#) from the Pennsylvania Department of Education clarifies that, “If a CEO actually performs the duties of a principal, that individual must hold appropriate state certification as a principal,” which involves [holding an Administrative Certificate](#).

Who is eligible to serve as a superintendent?

Superintendent candidates do not necessarily need experience in teaching or as a school-based leader.

A background in finance or business can be sufficient with some additional steps. The Pennsylvania [school code](#) outlines the necessary credentials for individuals seeking to become a superintendent. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) is authorized to [administer those requirements](#) and to issue candidates a Letter of Eligibility or a Commission Qualification Letter, either of which provides eligibility to be hired as a superintendent. The potential routes to becoming a superintendent in Pennsylvania are detailed in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Routes to Becoming a Superintendent in Pennsylvania



Note: The PA school code also requires superintendent candidates, and all professional employees, to be of “[good moral character](#).”

While many superintendents such as [Dr. William Hite](#) (Philadelphia SD 2012-2022) and [Dr. Anthony Hamlet](#) (Pittsburgh Public SD 2016-21) have taken a traditional route to become superintendent by serving as classroom educators and school administrators, others such as [Mark Roosevelt](#) (Pittsburgh Public 2005-10) and [Paul Vallas](#) (Philadelphia SD 2002-2007) had backgrounds in business or finance. In contrast, the current interim receiver of Chester Upland School District, [Nafis Nichols](#), would likely be eligible to become a superintendent in the future through the Option 2 alternate route.

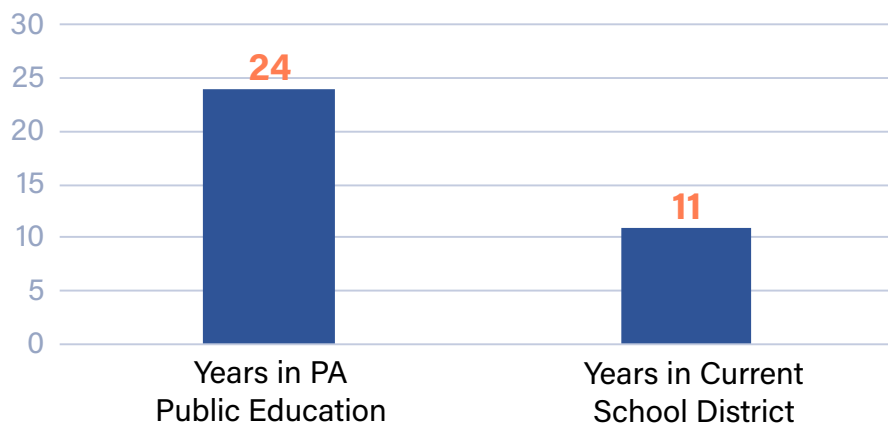
¹ There are currently three options to meet the Pennsylvania School Leadership Standards requirement:

1. A state-approved, graduate-level superintendent certification program
2. The PIL/NISL Executive Development Program
3. The PASA New Superintendents' Academy

What are the experience levels and academic credentials of PA superintendents?

Pennsylvania's publicly available data do not identify superintendents' years of experience specific to the superintendent role but do provide total years of experience in PA public education as a whole. RFA calculated that in 2020-21, superintendents in Pennsylvania had an average of **24 years of total experience working in PA public education** in at least some capacity, **11 years of which were spent working in their current school district** (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Average years of experience for PA Superintendents in 2020-21

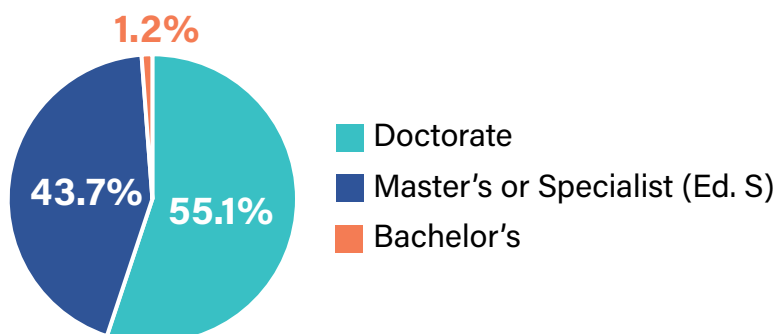


Note: This experience includes previous years serving as a superintendent, principal, other school leader, educator, or other school-based professional. Years of experience in private schools or in schools outside of PA are not included in this calculation. The average years of experience serving as a superintendent was not able to be calculated using available data.

Data Source: PDE's [professional staffing data](#).²

In 2020-21, almost all PA superintendents had a graduate degree, **with 55.1% having completed a doctorate and 43.7% with a master's or specialist degree** (Figure 3). These findings are similar to the School Superintendents Association (AASA) [2021 national study](#) showing 52.4% of superintendents have a doctorate and 43.5% have a master's or specialist degree.

Figure 3. PA Superintendent Degree Attainment 2020-21



² Most of the characteristics RFA analyzed (gender, years of experience, and degree level) can be found through the data published on PDE's website. Staff race or ethnicity is not publicly available and was secured by RFA through a formal records request.

What are the gender³ and racial demographics of PA's superintendents?

As shown in Figures 4 and 5, superintendents in the state of PA are **mostly men (75%)** and **predominantly White (95%)**.

Figure 4. Pennsylvania Superintendents by Gender, 2020-21

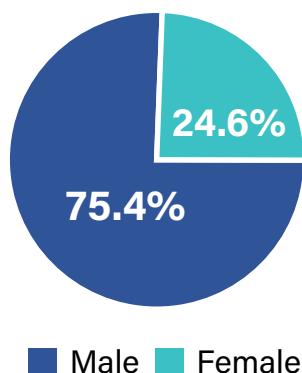
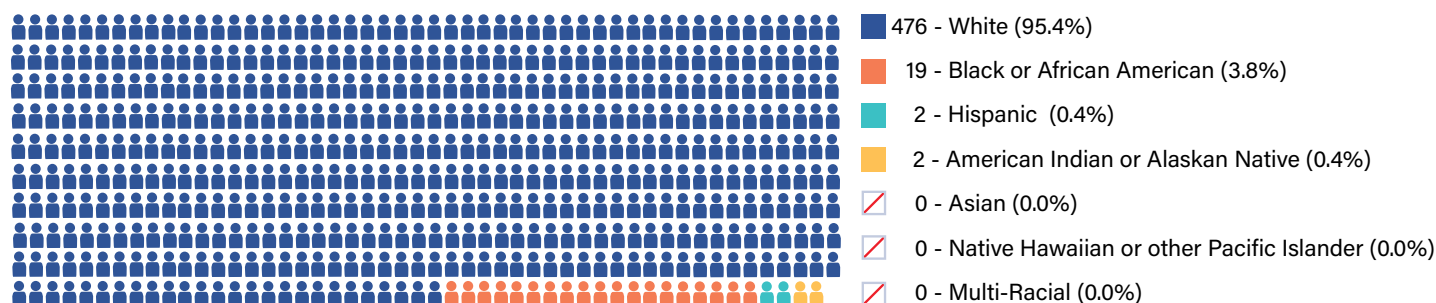


Figure 5: Pennsylvania Superintendents by Race or Ethnicity, 2020-21



Note: Race or ethnicity is labeled above as recorded by Pennsylvania Department of Education.

These Pennsylvania superintendent demographics are slightly more disparate than national rates. In a 2021 national [study](#), surveying 1,509 superintendents across 48 states, the AASA found 73.8% of superintendents who responded identified as male and 89.3% identified as White.

Moreover, Pennsylvania's share of female superintendents has decreased over the past eight years, from 28.3% in 2013-14 (not shown) to only 24.6% in 2020-21. Over the same time, the total share of superintendents of color increased slightly, from 2.4% in 2013-14 (not shown) to 4.6% in 2020-21, with the largest change among superintendents who identify as Black, whose share increased from 2.2% to 3.8%.

Meanwhile, the characteristics of PA superintendents represent stark racial and gender disparities when compared to teacher and student demographics. For example, [women made up 74% of PA teachers](#), but only 25% of superintendents. Additionally, [36% of Pennsylvania's public school students](#) are persons of color, compared to only 4.6% of Pennsylvania's superintendents.⁴

³ PDE data on gender is limited to male/female and does not reflect other gender identities, such as non-binary.

⁴ This disparity is even larger than race/ethnicity disparity between the share of students of color (36%) and teachers of color (6%), which is among the most disparate in the country as RFA documented in [Teacher Diversity in Pennsylvania from 2013-14 to 2019-20](#).

How much do superintendents get paid?

In the 2020-21 school year, the average annual salary for a superintendent at a PA public school district, as reported in the [PDE Individual Staffing Data](#), was \$153,812. This average includes wide variation in superintendent salaries across PA districts even among the highest paying districts as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The 10 highest superintendent salaries in Pennsylvania in 2020-21:

District	Superintendent Salary
Philadelphia City SD (Philadelphia, PA)	\$325,245
Unionville-Chadds Ford SD (Kennett Square, PA)	\$286,840
North Penn SD (Lansdale, PA)	\$286,536
Downingtown Area SD (Downingtown, PA)	\$282,568
West Chester Area SD (West Chester, PA)	\$282,220
Lower Merion SD (Ardmore, PA)	\$270,000
Colonial SD (Plymouth Meeting, PA)	\$254,262
Tredyffrin/Easttown SD (Wayne, PA)	\$252,150
Springfield Township SD (Oreland, PA)	\$251,464
Great Valley SD (Malvern, PA)	\$250,376

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) had the highest superintendent salary in 2020-21. SDP has a high student poverty rate and a history of underfunding, but the district is also many times larger than any other school system in the state. Meanwhile, the other districts in the top 10 include many of the wealthiest communities in the Commonwealth. Pittsburgh School District, the second largest district in the state, ranked #23 with a superintendent salary of \$229,473 in 2020-21.







How long do superintendents typically serve in their role?

Superintendent time in role varies widely. There have been [district](#), [state](#), and [national](#) reports about high superintendent turnover rates and a common narrative frames [short superintendent tenure](#) as a harmful trend for urban districts that, as previously noted, may face heightened pressures or challenges. If superintendents only stay in a position for a few years, districts are unlikely to see the effects of a strategic plan or policy reforms really take effect.

Nationally, estimates of the average tenure of superintendents range from 3-6 years, depending on how tenure or turnover is defined or which districts are included in the sample. For example, a 2018 [Broad Center Report](#) found large-district superintendents had an average completed tenure of 6.16 years, a [national study](#) in 2000 found average tenure ranged between 5-6 years, and a study in 2014 from the [Council of the Great City Schools](#) found average tenure for superintendents was 3.18 years.

To examine superintendent turnover, RFA calculated the number of superintendents⁵ employed by each Pennsylvania district during an eight-year span from 2013-14 and 2020-21 using [PDE Professional Staffing Data](#). As shown in Table 3 most districts were led by only one or two superintendents during these eight years (0-1 transitions), while 7 districts had 4 or 5 transitions during the same period.

Table 3. Pennsylvania School Districts by Number of Superintendent Transitions, 2013-14 to 2020-21

Number of Superintendent Transitions	Number of Districts
 No transition	147
 One transition	230
 Two transitions	91
 Three transitions	25
 Four transitions	6
 Five transitions	1

Notably, Superintendent William Hite recently [announced his upcoming resignation](#) after a tenure of nearly 10 years at the School District of Philadelphia and Superintendent Anthony Hamlet [resigned from Pittsburgh Public Schools](#) after five years.

Very little research examines why superintendents leave their positions, but a 2012 [study](#) of California superintendents found age to be the primary predictor of retirement. Other factors like relationships with the school board or leaving a position for a larger district offering a higher salary have also been identified as reasons for leaving. Recent [reporting](#) has also named the heightened stress of the pandemic due to struggles reopening school and navigating remote learning as a contributing factor superintendent resignations across the United States.

Are superintendents ever evaluated for their performance?

Yes. In fact, school boards in Pennsylvania are now required by [law](#) to conduct formal superintendent evaluations. Table 4 answers key questions about the main components of superintendent evaluation for PA districts:

Table 4. Components of Superintendent Evaluation for Pennsylvania School Districts

Who?	The school board should evaluate the district superintendent.
What?	Evaluations are directly related to a superintendent contract as contracts must include duties and performance expectations (including assessment tools and timelines). Evaluation criteria can include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - District-established annual measurable objectives - Student achievement on the state assessments like the PSSA or student growth as measured by the Pennsylvania Value-Added Assessment System (PVAAS) - Student attrition and graduation rates - Financial management standards and standards of operational excellence
When?	According to Section 1073.1 of the School Code, superintendents must be assessed annually under objective criteria. PASA notes that many districts tie evaluation to the school calendar and fiscal year planning, although it is ultimately up to districts to outline the timeline for evaluation in the superintendent's contract.
Where?	Both the criteria and the completed evaluations must be publicly posted on the district's website.
Why?	Apart from the requirement by law, PASA cites that superintendent evaluations are essential for district alignment, communication, and accountability

⁵ This analysis includes both superintendents and/or acting superintendents as categorized in the data set.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education does not designate a specific evaluation tool that districts must utilize. However, the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA) provides a [sample evaluation tool](#), [sample objective performance standards](#), and a [framework for developing](#) performance standards/evaluation tools.

Click [here](#) to review an example of a completed evaluation, the 2018-19 evaluation of Superintendent Hite from the School District of Philadelphia.

RFA also identified several resources that provide best practices to help school boards avoid common challenges with superintendent evaluation.⁶

Is there evidence of superintendents impacting student learning?

There is very **little evidence** of superintendents impacting student learning. For example, a 2016 [study](#) found that superintendents account for a very small amount (0.3%) of differences in student achievement and that hiring a new superintendent is not associated with improved student achievement. As the highest ranking official in a school district, superintendents tend to receive credit when things go well and blame when they do not, however inspirational leaders that make drastic and enduring improvements are incredibly rare.

In the book *Spinning Wheels*, Frederick M. Hess argued that education reform efforts often do not set superintendents up for success. As administrators who are often seen as political appointees, **superintendent candidates are typically hired if they promise innovation and change rather than steady implementation and improvement of predecessor's initiatives**. According to Hess, such innovation should not be preferred over the persistence and commitment that leads to proper implementation and planning.⁷

Who hires or terminates a superintendent?

Pennsylvania [law](#) grants the authority to hire a superintendent to the board of school directors for each school district. Decisions must be approved by majority vote at a public meeting held under the Pennsylvania Sunshine Act. The board [must enter a contract](#) with the superintendent between 3-5 years, which contains the full terms and conditions of employment, including the duties, responsibilities, job description and performance expectations. The contract should be available to the public through the PA Right-to-Know Law. The local school board is also the body that can terminate the superintendent for “[neglect of duty, incompetency, intemperance, or immorality](#).”

If a school district is governed by an entity other than a school board, the process may be different. For example, in Philadelphia Superintendent Hite was hired in 2010, by the state- and city-appointed School Reform Commission.

6 Hanover Research's [Best Practices in Superintendent Evaluation](#) (2015); American Association of School Administrators' (AASA) [Evaluating a Superintendent White Paper](#) (2010); AASA's journal article [Superintendent Evaluation Frameworks for Continuous Improvement: Using Evidence-based Processes to Promote the Stance of Improvement](#) (2018); [AASA's Revisiting Superintendent Evaluation](#) (2007); [Washington Standards-Based Superintendent Evaluation](#) (2013)

7 [Evaluating a Superintendent White Paper](#) (2010); AASA's journal article [Superintendent Evaluation Frameworks for Continuous Improvement: Using Evidence-based Processes to Promote the Stance of Improvement](#) (2018); AASA's [Revisiting Superintendent Evaluation](#) (2007); [Washington Standards-Based Superintendent Evaluation](#) (2013)

How can school and community members get involved in the hiring process for a new superintendent?

As mentioned, the [Pennsylvania Sunshine Act](#) and [Right-to-Know Law](#) grant community members the right to attend and sign up to speak at public meetings of a school board and to request public records related to a superintendent's contract and performance. There are many other ways community members can seek to have their voice heard in school board decisions, such as writing a letter or email to board members, submitting a Letter to the Editor or Op-Ed to a local paper, or hosting and inviting board members to a listening session to hear ideas and gather input from members of your community about what matters to them in the superintendent search.

Many district school boards create additional opportunities for community involvement when selecting a new superintendent. As of publication, Pittsburgh Public Schools has [not yet announced](#) any public process, but the **School District of Philadelphia's** Board of Education has designed several opportunities for community engagement in their search for the next superintendent. These opportunities include:

1. **Listening sessions.** These virtual and in-person sessions began in October 2021 as a strategy to hear from a wide range of stakeholders such as parents, students, teachers, district employees, and advocates. Attendees provided input on the skills required for the next leader.
2. **Online survey.** The board distributed the #PHLSuperSearch online survey and compiled feedback into an engagement [report](#). Like the listening sessions, survey feedback provided insight into the required skills and talents of the next superintendent.
3. **Superintendent Search Advisory Committee (SSAC).** The Board recently established a [13-member committee](#) to include diverse perspectives in the review of final candidates. Committee members include an SDP teacher and principal, two students, parents/guardians of students, and other community members. The SSAC will conduct confidential interviews with five finalists and these interviews will help inform the Board's selection of two final candidates.
4. **Public meet and greet.** There will be a public meet and greet to hear from the final two candidates before a final selection is made by the Board.

You can learn more [here](#) about the School District of Philadelphia's community engagement process, including the expected timeline of the superintendent search.

About PACER and Research for Action

The Pennsylvania Clearinghouse for Education Research (PACER) is a project of Research for Action (RFA), a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit education research organization. RFA seeks to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for historically underserved children and students. The PACER project is designed to inform state education policy discussions through rigorous, objective research; regular policy briefs; and research-based commentaries. For more information, please visit our website at www.researchforaction.org/pacer.

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