# The Leadership of School Administrators in Promoting Mental Health among Primary School Students: A Review Article

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## Abstract

The mental health of primary school students has become increasingly fragile, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly impacted children's emotional, social, and cognitive development. While existing studies have explored the roles of teachers and parents in supporting children's mental health, the role of school administrators remains underexamined, despite its critical importance. School leaders serve not only as policy architects but also as key drivers of safe and supportive learning environments. This review article aims to examine and synthesize current knowledge regarding the leadership roles of school administrators in promoting the mental health of primary school students. The analysis is structured around a multi-dimensional leadership framework, encompassing transformational, instructional, supportive, and distributed leadership models. Furthermore, the article proposes a set of comprehensive administrative strategies, including proactive policy formulation, staff development, the cultivation of a supportive school culture, and the implementation of a whole-school mental health promotion system. These strategies emphasize the necessity of cross-sector collaboration. Ultimately, fostering leadership capacity among school administrators who are attuned to the emotional, social, and cultural contexts of children is essential. Such leadership plays a pivotal role in enhancing student mental well-being and academic achievement in the long term.

## Introduction

In recent years, the mental health of primary school students has shown a continual upward trend in vulnerability across the globe, a phenomenon that has been significantly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This global health crisis has profoundly affected children's learning, emotional development, and social functioning (World Health Organization, 2020). The primary school years represent a critical phase in human development, during which children are particularly susceptible to stress, anxiety, and depression. If not adequately addressed, such mental health challenges can have long-term consequences on academic performance and overall quality of life. An increasing body of empirical evidence highlights the multifaceted mental health impact of COVID-19 on children and adolescents. These issues persist as social contexts evolve. Contrary to early assumptions that the pandemic would act as a social leveler, it has, in fact, disproportionately affected certain groups, particularly children from low-income households

and ethnic minority backgrounds (Chavira et al., 2022). Longitudinal studies conducted across various countries further indicate a heightened prevalence of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and social difficulties among children in the post-pandemic period compared to pre-pandemic times (Wang et al., 2022). While some studies report improvements in specific areas such as reduced behavioral issues or better sleep quality (Xu et al., 2025) the overall picture remains one of pronounced negative impact—especially for girls, children from low-income families, and those from single-parent households (Chavira et al., 2022). Although a number of studies have addressed the roles of teachers and parents in supporting student mental health, there remains a noticeable gap in research focused specifically on the leadership roles of school administrators—particularly in primary education. This is despite the fact that early childhood is a foundational period for sustainable emotional and social development. The limited attention to school leaders as policymakers and key actors in implementing psychological support systems in schools represents a critical oversight in the current literature (Gray et al., 2022). Within the school context, principals and school administrators serve as pivotal agents in setting the vision, cultivating a psychologically safe school culture, and equipping teachers with accurate knowledge about child mental health (Issah et al., 2025). Proactive, student-centered leadership that demonstrates a deep understanding of children's psychological development is essential for fostering emotionally resilient learning environments (Seemakam et al., 2021). Recent studies further affirm that effective school leadership is directly correlated with the establishment of positive school climates, enhanced teacher effectiveness, and improved student outcomes. In this regard, school leaders function as architects of learning environments that simultaneously nurture both teacher development and student well-being (Lijun & Te, 2024).

Nevertheless, current school-based mental health services often remain rooted in traditional therapeutic models, emphasizing treatment rather than prevention or contextual integration. These models frequently overlook the broader social and environmental dimensions within schools that significantly influence children's mental health (Xiao

et al., 2017). Contemporary research calls for a shift toward more integrative approaches, positioning schools as adaptive spaces that actively promote student well-being and learning through collaborative support systems involving teachers, parents, and administrators (Reddy et al., 2020). Additionally, teachers increasingly express a need for practical, context-sensitive training in mental health—training that is immediately applicable within their specific school environments. This reflects the urgent necessity to strengthen school leaders' competencies in both academic and psychological support, thereby enabling them to function as supportive leaders in practice (Shelemy et al., 2019). Despite the growing recognition of the importance of mental health in primary education, a critical gap persists in understanding how school administrators can effectively integrate academic leadership with the promotion of students' psychological well-being. While prior research has examined the roles of teachers and parents in supporting children's mental health (Chavira et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022), comparatively little attention has been given to the proactive role of primary school administrators in creating environments that foster both academic achievement and emotional resilience. Early education constitutes a foundational stage in human development, yet school leaders are often overlooked as key architects of systemic mental health support, highlighting the necessity for focused research in this domain. Empirical studies underscore the central role of school leadership in shaping positive school climates and enhancing student outcomes. Lijun and Te (2024) demonstrated that effective leadership is strongly associated with improved school climate, teacher effectiveness, and student achievement, while Issah et al. (2025) emphasized the critical function of principals in cultivating psychologically safe school cultures and equipping teachers with accurate knowledge about child mental health. Nevertheless, these insights largely derive from secondary or higher education contexts, leaving primary education underexplored. Moreover, much of the existing literature emphasizes reactive, treatment-based interventions rather than proactive, leadership-driven strategies that integrate prevention, academic guidance, and emotional support (Xiao et al., 2017;

Reddy et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified the mental health challenges faced by students, underscoring the urgent need for effective, forward-looking leadership (WHO, 2020). Yet, limited research has examined how school administrators can strategically implement comprehensive support systems to mitigate these challenges. This study seeks to address this critical gap by investigating how primary school administrators can act as proactive, supportive leaders who integrate academic oversight with holistic student support. By elucidating the mechanisms through which leadership can cultivate environments conducive to mental health, emotional resilience, and academic engagement, the research aims to provide evidence-based insights for educators, policymakers, and scholars dedicated to enhancing the quality and well-being of early education.

## Objective

This review article thus aims to explore and synthesize existing knowledge regarding school leadership for the promotion of mental health among primary school students. It draws on both domestic and international literature to propose a conceptual framework that can be used to guide the development of schools as truly safe and emotionally nurturing environments in the 21st century.

### Scope of the Review

This review article examines the dynamic interplay between educational leadership and student mental health in primary school settings. It begins by exploring the concept of mental health among young learners and the challenges they face in today's educational and social environments. It then addresses the notion of leadership within the educational context, focusing on both theoretical foundations and practical applications. The review highlights the critical role of school administrators in promoting student well-being through policy development, school climate, and cross-sector collaboration. Furthermore, it synthesizes key school management strategies-such as integrated models and whole-school approaches -that effectively support mental health. The article concludes with practical recommendations to guide leaders, educators, and policymakers in fostering

holistic, sustainable mental health systems in primary education.

## Methods

This study adopted a conceptual and integrative review design to synthesize literature and policy frameworks concerning mental health promotion in primary education, with an emphasis on the role of educational leadership. To ensure methodological rigor, a systematic search was conducted across major databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. Search terms such as "student mental health promotion," "educational leadership," "social and emotional learning (SEL)," and "school-based support systems" were employed. Inclusion criteria required that sources (a) focused on primary school contexts, (b) explicitly addressed mental health promotion or leadership practices, and (c) were peer-reviewed journal articles, authoritative international reports (e.g., WHO, UNESCO), or national policy documents published between 2000 and 2024. Exclusion criteria eliminated studies that focused exclusively on secondary or tertiary education, lacked empirical grounding, or were not accessible in full text. Sources were appraised based on methodological quality, theoretical contribution, and contextual relevance, while grey literature and pre-publication materials were critically noted for their potential limitations in reliability.

### Critical Analysis

The analysis differentiated clearly between evidence-based findings and conceptual proposals. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate the effectiveness of SEL programs, trauma-informed practices, and whole-school support systems in improving student well-being. These findings provide strong evidence of impact, although variations in study design, sample characteristics, and implementation fidelity highlight the need for cautious interpretation and adaptation to local contexts. In contrast, conceptual models of transformational, instructional, supportive, and distributed leadership were synthesized to explore their potential applicability in embedding mental health within school culture and management, though these remain largely theoretical in educational

psychology literature. Evidence from the Thai context indicates that multidisciplinary collaboration and culturally responsive practices are essential; however, the strength of this evidence varies, underscoring the need for further empirical validation. Drawing from these insights, the review proposes a comprehensive framework that integrates policy, school culture, curriculum, and stakeholder engagement as a strategic model for promoting mental health in primary schools.

# Results

## The Concept of Mental Health among Primary School Students

### 1. Definition and Scope of Mental Health

Mental health in primary school students is a multidimensional construct that significantly influences holistic development, encompassing learning engagement, social adaptation, and overall quality of life (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020; WHO, 2020; Patel et al., 2018). It extends beyond the absence of psychological disorders to include emotional stability, resilience, and positive engagement with one's environment. Mental health is shaped by both internal factors—such as genetics, emotional regulation, and coping strategies—and external conditions, including family support, school safety, and socio-cultural influences (Kirkbride et al., 2024; Evans et al., 2018).

### 2. Developmental Challenges in Primary Education

Children in the primary school stage encounter complex cognitive, emotional, and social challenges. Pressures from academic expectations, peer interactions, and family dynamics interact to influence psychological well-being. Empirical studies emphasize that without structured support, these pressures can increase risk behaviors, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation (Wu et al., 2025; Greenberg et al., 2023; Lawson et al., 2019). Recognizing these developmental challenges is essential for designing interventions that are both proactive and contextually relevant.

### 3. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as a Mechanism

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs are critical mechanisms for promoting resilience, emotional competence, and responsible decision-making (Guo et al., 2023; Roy, 2021). Evidence demonstrates that multi-tiered SEL strategies—comprising universal, selective, and indicated interventions—effectively reduce risk behaviors and enhance student well-being, particularly when integrated with collaborative assessment and an inclusive school culture (Ştefan et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2025).

### 4. Contextual Considerations in Thailand

In the Thai educational context, student support systems, including homeroom teachers and multidisciplinary teams, exist but require further strengthening. Findings indicate a pressing need to enhance teachers' SEL competencies and foster stronger school-community partnerships (Tampubolon et al., 2023). Culturally responsive strategies, such as localized assessment tools and training aligned with Thai societal norms, are essential to ensure equitable and sustainable mental health promotion (Saelao & Siththada, 2024; Boontonot & Wanbancherd, 2025; Evans et al., 2018).

### 5. Practical Application

To secure long-term psychological well-being, SEL and mental health promotion must be embedded into national education policies, teacher professional development programs, and school-level practices. Coordinated efforts across families, schools, and communities are required to foster environments that support children's stable development amid the rapid social, technological, and economic transitions of the 21st century (OECD, 2020; Greenberg et al., 2023).

## The Concept of Leadership in the Educational Context

### 1. Leadership as a Foundational Force in Education

Leadership in education is widely recognized as a critical factor shaping learning quality, student well-being, and overall school performance. It goes beyond routine administration to include the cultivation of organizational culture, capacity building for teachers, and the creation of emotionally supportive learning environments (Adeniyi et al., 2024; Li, 2024). Research consistently affirms that effective school leadership is strongly linked to both academic achievement and student mental health, particularly during periods of rapid educational and societal change (Taufik & Istiarsono, 2020; Day et al., 2014).

## 2. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership emphasizes vision, inspiration, and holistic growth. By fostering a culture of psychological safety, inclusivity, and motivation, it enhances both teacher performance and student engagement (Sasan et al., 2023; Dawkins et al., 2021). Such leadership encourages innovation, nurtures resilience, and builds strong school identities, all of which are essential for promoting student mental well-being (Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016).

## 3. Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership plays a pivotal role in guiding curriculum design, supporting pedagogical quality, and leveraging data for continuous improvement (Hallinger, 2005; Akomodi, 2025). It has particular relevance for mental health promotion, as leaders can integrate Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into teaching practices, enhance resilience, and reduce behavioral risks (Greenberg et al., 2023; Lawson et al., 2019). Instructional leadership thus bridges academic learning with emotional development.

## 4. Supportive Leadership

Supportive leadership focuses on building trust, empathy, and psychological safety within schools. By fostering strong relationships, emotional responsiveness, and collective efficacy, supportive leaders create conditions conducive to both teacher satisfaction and student well-being (Urrila & Eva, 2024; Meyer et al., 2020; Klein & Schwanenberg, 2020). This leadership style is particularly critical in addressing stigma related to mental health and ensuring an inclusive environment.

## 6. Toward an Integrative Model

Scholars increasingly advocate for integrative frameworks that combine transformational, instructional, supportive, and distributed leadership approaches. The model of Leadership for Learning and Well-being encapsulates this integration, blending strategic planning, inclusive communication, and shared responsibility to foster both cognitive and emotional development (Adeniyi et al., 2024; Issah et al., 2025). Such dynamic, multifaceted leadership is essential for navigating contemporary educational challenges while ensuring environments in which students thrive.

## 7. Practical Application

School administrators can apply these leadership models by establishing clear mental health goals, supporting teacher autonomy, and creating collaborative structures such as interdisciplinary teams. For example, distributed leadership empowers staff and stakeholders to participate actively in mental health promotion, while instructional leadership guides SEL implementation and evidence-based pedagogical decisions. These strategies are supported both theoretically and by evidence demonstrating improved student resilience and engagement (Bastea et al., 2023).

### The Role of School Administrators in Promoting Mental Health

#### 1. Strategic Policy and Organizational Culture

School administrators play a central role in shaping policies and fostering an organizational culture that supports student mental health. This leadership extends beyond academic oversight to establishing comprehensive frameworks that address both intellectual and emotional development (Roy, 2021; Webster et al., 2020). Evidence indicates that student mental well-being is foundational to academic achievement, with studies showing that over 42% of high school students report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, underscoring the importance of emotional resilience (Green et al., 2021; Patel et al., 2018). Administrators are thus tasked with integrating mental health priorities into school policies, culture, and everyday practices.

#### 2. Proactive and Data-Informed Leadership

Effective promotion of student mental health requires administrators to adopt a proactive, strategic, and data-driven approach. This involves systematic risk assessment, continuous monitoring, and individualized support, complemented by preventative initiatives (Daly et al., 2025; Weist et al., 2017). By using data to inform decisions and setting measurable objectives, administrators can ensure that interventions are evidence-based and outcomes are tracked over time.

#### 3. Integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Administrators are instrumental in embedding SEL and life-skill programs into school curricula. SEL

initiatives promote emotional regulation, resilience, and social competence, thereby reducing risk behaviors and improving academic engagement (Wu et al., 2025; Greenberg et al., 2023). Coordinated efforts include training teachers and staff to apply trauma-informed practices, fostering a supportive and psychologically safe environment, and reducing stigma around mental health (Paccaud et al., 2021; Lawson et al., 2019).

### 4. Multidisciplinary Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement

Sustainable mental health promotion requires administrators to coordinate multidisciplinary teams involving teachers, mental health professionals, parents, and external agencies (Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2021; López et al., 2021). Such collaboration ensures integrated support systems, clear referral pathways, and shared responsibility for student well-being. Transparent communication with stakeholders and ongoing community engagement further strengthen accountability and program effectiveness (Biermann et al., 2023).

### 5. Staff Well-being and School Climate

School administrators must also prioritize the mental health of teachers and staff. By implementing welfare mechanisms, reducing workplace stressors, and promoting professional support networks, administrators help sustain a positive school climate that enhances both staff and student well-being (OECD, 2020; Webster et al., 2020). Additionally, interventions targeting bullying prevention and psychological safety contribute to a nurturing and inclusive school environment.

### Synthesis of School Management Approaches that Promote Student Mental Health

#### 1. Policy Integration and Strategic Planning

Effective school management prioritizes student mental health as a foundational factor influencing both developmental outcomes and academic performance. Administrators must proactively formulate and embed mental health policies into school development plans, integrating emotional skills training, student development activities, and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) across all grade levels (Richter et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2018). Such strategic planning ensures that mental health promotion is systematically incorporated into everyday school practices rather than treated as an ancillary initiative.

#### 2. Cultivation of a Mentally Healthy School Culture

A psychologically safe and supportive school culture is essential. Administrators should foster resilience, empathy, and open communication through structured activities such as homeroom sessions and safe emotional reflection spaces (Dorado et al., 2016; Greenberg et al., 2023). Emphasizing inclusivity and cultural responsiveness, schools can create environments that encourage student engagement, reduce stigma, and promote holistic well-being (Wu et al., 2025; Tampubolon et al., 2023).

#### 3. Professional Capacity Building

Sustainable mental health promotion relies on ongoing teacher development. Professional capacity building includes training educators in SEL, stress recognition, and trauma-informed pedagogy to ensure timely and appropriate responses to students' emotional needs (Dorado et al., 2016; Paccaud et al., 2021). By equipping staff with practical skills and knowledge, administrators enable the effective delivery of mental health programs and strengthen overall school resilience.

#### 4. Interdisciplinary Support Systems

Establishing coordinated support systems is crucial. Schools should implement interdisciplinary teams comprising educators, mental health professionals, families, and community agencies to ensure clear referral pathways and integrated case management (López et al., 2021; Darlington & Masson, 2021). This collaborative approach promotes comprehensive care and enables schools to respond to diverse student needs effectively.

#### 5. Whole-School Mental Health Promotion Framework

The Whole-School Mental Health Promotion (WSMHP) model underscores the importance of multi-tiered interventions, encompassing universal programs such as social and emotional learning (SEL) accessible to all students, selective support targeting at-risk groups, and indicated interventions tailored for students requiring intensive assistance (Patel et al., 2018; Boyle, 2020). By recognizing

mental health through social and cultural lenses rather than exclusively biomedical paradigms, school administrators can address broader determinants, including inequality, individual life experiences, and adverse childhood events (WHO, 2020; United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), 2017; Sun et al., 2023). Moreover, co-creating initiatives with students, teachers, and parents fosters shared ownership, enhances engagement, and contributes to the long-term sustainability of mental health programs within the educational context (Darlington & Masson, 2021).

*6. Practical Application*
Administrators can use this framework by co-creating programs with students, teachers, and parents to ensure shared ownership and sustainability. The Whole-School Mental Health Promotion model guides tiered interventions, while culturally and socially sensitive approaches ensure equity and inclusivity. By addressing implementation challenges—such as resource limitations or staff workload—through phased rollouts, digital tools, and community partnerships, administrators can translate research evidence into effective, real-world strategies that enhance both academic and emotional outcomes (Wilson et al., 2024).

## Discussion

The findings of this research underscore the interdependence between mental health promotion and educational leadership in shaping the developmental trajectories of primary school students. Mental health, as conceptualized in both global health frameworks and educational theory, encompasses not only the absence of psychological disorders but also the cultivation of emotional regulation, resilience, and social competence—capacities that are central to academic engagement and lifelong learning (OECD, 2020; WHO, 2020; Kirkbride et al., 2024). This aligns with the theoretical foundations of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which emphasize the integration of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains of development. Empirical evidence confirms that structured, multi-tiered SEL frameworks—comprising universal, selective, and indicated interventions—can significantly enhance student well-being and academic performance (Patel et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2025). From a leadership perspective, the results support the argument that school leadership is not merely administrative but inherently transformative. Theories of transformational, instructional, supportive, and distributed leadership collectively demonstrate how leadership practices shape organizational culture, enact inclusive policies, and create psychologically safe environments conducive to learning (Adeniyi et al., 2024; Sasan et al., 2023). These findings converge with prior research indicating that leadership-driven initiatives, particularly when grounded in trauma-informed practices, interdisciplinary collaboration, and community engagement, are instrumental in sustaining mental health support systems within schools (Roy, 2021; López et al., 2021; Kourgiantakis, 2023). However, contrasting perspectives in the literature caution that leadership models emphasizing policy directives without adequate teacher participation may risk tokenistic implementation, thereby undermining long-term sustainability (Xiao et al., 2017; Shelemy et al., 2019). This highlights the necessity of balancing top-down leadership strategies with bottom-up teacher agency to ensure systemic coherence. Despite the promise of integrative frameworks, contextual barriers remain a significant constraint. In resource-limited school systems—particularly within low- and middle-income contexts—financial constraints, inadequate professional training, and limited access to mental health specialists restrict the implementation of holistic initiatives (Reddy et al., 2020). In Thailand, for instance, although foundational structures for school-based support exist, the findings of this study reveal the urgent need for capacity-building, policy integration, and culturally responsive assessment mechanisms to ensure equity and sustainability (Khanthavudh et al., 2025; Lee-Anant & Kungwansith, 2025). Taken together, the synthesis affirms that leadership-driven approaches, when contextually adapted and supported by adequate resources, provide a critical pathway to safeguarding students' mental health. By situating student well-being as a central rather than peripheral concern, school leaders can foster environments that not only enhance academic performance but also

equip students with the socio-emotional resilience necessary to navigate the complexities of the 21st century.

## Conclusions

The mental health of primary school students serves as a critical foundation for learning, emotional growth, and social development, particularly in the post-COVID-19 context where children's psychological vulnerabilities have intensified. The promotion of mental health within schools is inseparable from the strategic leadership of school administrators, who must function not only as institutional managers but also as designers of support systems, cultural facilitators, and policy architects. Effective leadership in this domain requires an integrated framework encompassing transformational leadership to shape a positive school climate, instructional leadership to align academic and emotional development, supportive leadership to respond to individual needs, and distributed leadership to foster inclusive stakeholder participation. These interconnected leadership approaches collectively contribute to a sustainable and comprehensive mental health system. As such, school management must advance toward the model of "Mental Health Promoting Schools," adopting a Whole-School Mental Health System that embeds Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), early intervention, psychological safety, and community collaboration into every dimension of educational governance. This paradigm is essential to ensuring that schools become resilient, nurturing environments that support the well-being and lifelong development of students in the 21st century.

## Recommendations

Building upon the findings of this research, the following recommendations are proposed to guide the application of results in policy, practice, and further scholarly inquiry. These recommendations are designed to be both actionable and adaptable, highlighting not only strategic directions but also potential challenges in implementation and corresponding strategies to address them.

*School Leadership and Institutional Practices*
The results underscore the pivotal role of school leadership in advancing mental health among primary school students. School administrators should adopt holistic leadership approaches that embed mental health priorities into school development plans and institutional culture. This includes institutionalizing trauma-informed practices to enhance psychological safety for both students and staff. While such systemic integration may face challenges such as limited expertise or competing priorities, capacity-building initiatives and professional learning networks can serve as mechanisms to overcome these barriers.

*Teacher Development and Professional Learning*
Consistent with the study's findings, teachers and school personnel must receive sustained training in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), emotionally responsive pedagogy, and behavioral observation. Importantly, the creation of multidisciplinary support teams that include teachers, psychologists, and parents can bridge expertise and promote coordinated interventions. Challenges may arise from resource limitations and workload constraints; however, modular training programs, peer-coaching systems, and digital learning platforms can provide feasible avenues for scalable professional development.

Policy Integration and Systemic Support
At the policy level, results highlight the need for the Ministry of Education to formally integrate student mental health into national education policies, strengthen the provision of school-based psychological services, and institutionalize monitoring systems for evidence-based interventions. The implementation of such systemic reforms may encounter challenges related to funding allocation and regional disparities, which can be mitigated by phased rollouts, public–private partnerships, and equity-focused resource distribution strategies.

*Family and Community Engagement*
The study confirms that parents and communities play a decisive role in supporting mental health initiatives. Families should be actively engaged in co-designing programs, fostering open communication with schools, and reducing stigma around mental health. Community-based collaborations can also expand the

reach of school-based interventions. Potential barriers, such as cultural resistance or limited awareness, may be addressed through sustained public education campaigns and community dialogue platforms.

*Future Research Directions*
In light of the findings, future research should further investigate the role of educational leadership in shaping student mental health outcomes across diverse school contexts, with particular attention to the Thai educational system. Additionally, studies should examine the practical implementation of Whole-School Mental Health Promotion frameworks, assessing not only effectiveness but also conditions for scalability and sustainability. Such inquiry will provide critical evidence to refine best practices and ensure that mental health promotion becomes an enduring element of primary education reform.

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