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Information Brief



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With Effective Planning, Accountability, and Oversight, School Districts Can Successfully Outsource Services

at a glance

School districts outsource services for a variety of reasons, including lowering labor and overhead costs, improving access to increased technical expertise, increasing personnel flexibility, shifting capital investment costs, improving access to state-of-the-art equipment, and improving the organization's focus on education. Most often, services outsourced by school districts are in the areas of transportation, facilities maintenance and construction, and food services.

School districts can take several steps to better ensure the success of outsourcing:

- evaluate the availability of the services in the private sector;
- develop a business case to evaluate the costs and benefits of outsourcing;
- establish a plan for transitioning into outsourcing;
- clearly identify contractor performance and cost expectations in the contract document;
- establish mechanisms to ensure the contractor meets district expectations; and
- develop a contingency plan to be used in the event that outsourcing does not meet district expectations.

Scope

This report is one in a series that highlights cost savings opportunities identified in *Sharpening the Pencil* reviews of Florida school districts.¹ This report identifies strategies school districts can use to outsource support services. Other reports in this series examine opportunities to reduce school facilities, transportation, and food service expenses.

Conclusions

School districts outsource services for a variety of reasons

All Florida school districts face the same problem: the need to improve student performance with a relatively constant level of resources. Thus, state school districts must look for ways to minimize their costs of operational and support services in order to make more money available for classroom instruction. Cost-cutting measures most often implemented by school districts involve eliminating services, reducing administrative layers, re-engineering processes, and increasing productivity and accountability. Relatively few school districts

¹ Enacted in 2001, the *Sharpening the Pencil Program* ([Ch. 1008.35, F.S.](#)) is intended to improve school district management and use of resources and to identify cost savings. The reviews are conducted by OPPAGA and the Auditor General with 30 districts reviewed to date.

have used outsourcing as a means of achieving savings.² When properly implemented, outsourcing has the potential to reduce costs while maintaining or even improving service quality. In addition, outsourcing may produce other benefits for districts, as shown in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1 **Outsourcing May Produce Several Benefits for School Districts**

- ☑ **Lowering Labor and Overhead Costs.** Outsourcing can reduce overall labor costs for school districts because hourly pay and benefits for those employed by contractors are often cheaper than if the district employed these individuals directly. Depending on the number of positions directly eliminated through outsourcing, school districts may be able to make staff reductions in other areas, such as human resources and payroll; eliminate certain supervisory positions; and reduce office space, equipment, and utility expenses.
 - ☑ **Improving Access to Technical Expertise.** Some school districts turn to outsourcing to obtain specialized expertise or professional services, particularly when these services are needed for a short term or infrequently.
 - ☑ **Increasing Personnel Flexibility.** School districts use outsourcing to increase their ability to quickly hire new employees or terminate employees who perform poorly or are no longer needed.
 - ☑ **Shifting Capital Investment Costs and Improving Access to State-Of-Art Equipment.** Outsourcing allows school districts to avoid making large, up-front expenditures for capital-intensive services. In addition, private companies can often adapt to new technologies faster than school districts because of the private sector's ability to invest in equipment or technology on a cash flow basis rather than waiting for an annual appropriation.
 - ☑ **Improving the District's Focus on Education.** School districts that outsource may find that they are better able to focus more directly on their primary mission of providing a quality education for students. Outsourcing frees district administrators from concerns associated with the day-to-day administration of certain support services not directly relating to the education of students.
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Source: OPPAGA.

School districts most often outsource support services

School districts have outsourced a variety of services. Most often, districts have outsourced services in the areas of transportation, facilities maintenance and construction, and food services. Outsourcing arrangements include contracting with a third party to deliver all services within an area to contracting for selected specialized services. Exhibit 2 provides examples of support services often outsourced by school districts.

Exhibit 2 **School Districts Most Often Have Outsourced Transportation, Facilities, and Food Services**

Transportation

- Selected student transportation routes
- All student transportation operations
- Specialized maintenance services such as oil changes; glass repair; rebuilding transmissions, alternators, and engines; radiator work; towing and wrecker service; and tire mounting and balancing
- All "white fleet" (district vehicles that are not buses) maintenance

Facilities Maintenance and Construction

- All construction management services
- All custodial services
- Specialized maintenance services such as HVAC filter replacement, HVAC repair, fire extinguisher inspection, fire sprinkler inspections, fire alarm servicing, electrical wiring, elevator inspection and servicing, motorized bleacher maintenance, roof repair, asbestos removal, annual health and safety inspections, underground tank removal, pest control, painting, and carpet/tile work

Food Service

- Management of entire food service operations
 - Specialized food services such as warehousing; delivering food, commodities, and supplies; converting USDA commodities into ready-to-heat-and-serve items; and providing a la carte menu items
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Source: OPPAGA.

² For the purposes of this report, "outsourcing" is used broadly to include contracting all or part of a service or function.

Outsourcing entire functions. Some school districts have contracted with private companies to provide all transportation, facilities maintenance, facilities construction, and/or food service operations. Districts have given different reasons for outsourcing these services. For example, larger districts may outsource these functions because they have access to firms capable of meeting the needs of large-scale district operations. Other districts outsourced functions in order to focus their attention on providing education to their students.

Duval and Santa Rosa County School Districts are examples of districts that have outsourced their entire transportation and food service operations. When doing so, districts generally enter into an arrangement where the contractor assumes duties associated with employing, training, and supervising bus drivers, and maintaining the bus fleet. Districts that outsourced the management of their food programs generally have arranged to have the contractor hire and manage food service employees, prepare and deliver the meals, and provide warehousing and storage.³

Districts that outsourced facilities functions have generally outsourced construction management or custodial services. For example, the Okaloosa County School District has outsourced its construction management operations. Under these arrangements, the construction management company provides all aspects of construction from planning and design to construction of district facilities. Districts that outsource construction management generally require that construction management firms meet a guaranteed maximum price and be responsible for any costs that exceed this price.

Districts that have outsourced their custodial operations generally have entered into a contract with a private company to provide a full range of custodial services for all district schools. Under some of these arrangements, the

contractor directly employs and supervises district custodians, provides workers' compensation processing for these employees, and purchases cleaning products and equipment. Other school districts, such as Polk and Volusia, continue to directly employ custodial employees, but have outsourced the management of school custodial services, custodial training, clerical work, and the purchasing of equipment and chemicals.

Outsourcing specialized services. School districts also have opted to outsource specialized services associated with transportation, facilities, and food functions. Most often, districts have outsourced these services to improve their access to technology, equipment, and individuals with the expertise and necessary certifications. Districts have entered into contracts for services ranging from those that are routine to those they seldom need.

For example, several districts, including St. Lucie and Wakulla, have outsourced services such as rebuilding transmissions, radiator work, and "white fleet" (non-school bus on-road vehicles) maintenance. In addition, some school districts such as Duval have outsourced certain services including filter replacement, fire sprinkler inspection, roof repair, and elevator maintenance and inspection to reduce maintenance costs and service outages.

Several districts, including Lake and Brevard, have outsourced food warehousing services. These districts often were having difficulty keeping pace with rapidly growing student populations or did not have funds available to purchase land and/or build the necessary facilities needed for storage. Outsourcing warehousing services is particularly attractive to districts that are experiencing high property and construction costs.

A few school districts, including Gadsden and Hillsborough, have contracted with food processors to either convert USDA commodities into final ready-to-heat-and-serve items for delivery to the district or provide cash rebates in exchange for the commodities. In these

³ Districts that choose to outsource their food services function must retain certain responsibilities required by federal law. (Refer to National School Lunch Program, [7 CFR § 210](#).)

arrangements, district commodities are turned into a finished food product and then sold back to the district. Thus, contracting with private food processors may allow a district to make more efficient use of its commodities allotment and reduce labor and warehousing costs. In addition, in some of these arrangements, when a district purchases food items that incorporate its commodities, it receives a cash rebate from the processor.

Districts can take several steps to better ensure the success of outsourcing

To better ensure the success of outsourcing initiatives, district staff should develop reliable and complete cost and benefit information needed by school boards to determine whether it is in the district's best interests to outsource services. In addition, once the decision is made to outsource, staff should develop mechanisms to ensure a smooth transition into outsourcing and manage and oversee contractors. At a minimum school districts should

- evaluate the availability of the services in the private sector;
- develop a business case to evaluate the costs and benefits of outsourcing;
- establish a plan for transitioning into outsourcing;
- clearly identify contractor performance and cost expectations in the contract document;
- establish mechanisms to ensure the contractor meets district expectations; and
- develop a contingency plan to be used in the event outsourcing does not meet district expectations.

Appendix A lists tips for effectively outsourcing transportation, facilities maintenance, facilities construction, and food services.

Evaluate the availability of the services in the private sector. The availability of reliable and experienced service providers in the private sector is a significant factor determining the viability of outsourcing, particularly for smaller and rural school districts. However, regardless of its size, a school district should identify

private companies that have the capacity, experience, and reputation for providing the service it is considering outsourcing. If possible, districts also should seek out companies that have specific school district experience since they are more likely to be accustomed to school district operations and providing services to students.

A valuable source of information is the experience of other school districts. This is especially the case when a school district is assessing whether to outsource entire operations such as food service and transportation because there are a limited number of private companies that specialize in offering these services to school districts. School districts should contact other districts that have contracted their operations with these companies to discuss their level of satisfaction with the arrangement and any problems they may have encountered.

The size of the district can play a significant role in the availability of companies with which to contract. For example, larger school districts are more likely than smaller, rural ones to have access to multiple private companies with the capital and expertise needed to provide services. Larger school districts may be able to contract with one of the national companies that specialize in providing food or transportation services to school districts. Due to the scale of the service to be contracted, smaller school districts may not be attractive candidates to these national companies. However, while smaller districts may have difficulty finding private companies with whom they can contract to provide an entire operation, they may find success in outsourcing specific services for which they lack technology, equipment, or expertise. Smaller districts may also find it beneficial to combine orders with other small districts or with a large district to request bids for services. Combining with other districts allows smaller districts to achieve large volume discounts.

Develop a business case to evaluate the costs and benefits of outsourcing. In order to decide if outsourcing is in the school district's best interest, a district should develop a business case

to help the school board evaluate the costs and benefits of outsourcing. The business case analysis should include four primary steps:

- identify the benefits the district hopes to achieve through outsourcing,
- identify the responsibilities that would be transferred to the contractor,
- calculate the cost impact of outsourcing, and
- develop a structured proposal so that the school board can compare the benefits and costs.

First, districts should identify how they expect to benefit from outsourcing a particular service. For example, a district may be considering outsourcing as a way to reduce its operating costs. Alternatively, a district may be trying to improve a service that has a history of poor performance or wanting to gain access to skilled employees and specialized equipment necessary to provide a service more efficiently and effectively. Identifying potential benefits not only helps determine whether to contract a service, but also helps with later establishing performance and cost standards for contractors so that the district can assess whether outsourcing is meeting its expectations.

To the extent possible, the district should be specific about its expectations and so that it can set measurable objectives for the outsourcing initiative. For example, if a district intends to improve past performance problems, it should identify the outcomes it expects to achieve (e.g., reduce parent complaints by 20% or increase student participation in the school lunch program by 10%). If district administrators think outsourcing will improve the efficiency of operations and help them reduce the number of district employees, the district should identify how many and which positions it intends to eliminate and the expected timeframe for staffing reductions.

Second, after the district identifies the benefits desired through outsourcing, it should decide which responsibilities would be transferred to the contractor. For instance, if a district were considering outsourcing its transportation

function, it would likely transfer to the contractor responsibilities such as routing, fleet maintenance, or the purchase of buses. However, the district would likely retain other responsibilities including management and oversight, safety inspections, and the scheduling of field trips. Districts also would retain the responsibility for paying for certain utility services such as electricity or water in the event that the contractor used district-provided facilities for the maintenance and storage of buses.

Third, the district should determine the cost impact of outsourcing, including the direct and indirect costs it could avoid by transferring responsibilities to the contractor and the direct and indirect costs associated with having a vendor provide services. Examples of indirect costs include electric, telephone, maintenance and custodial services, warehousing, equipment depreciation, security, and training. Direct costs and some indirect costs associated with a service can be eliminated by outsourcing, but some indirect costs will remain. Without taking into account both direct and indirect costs, a district cannot make an accurate upfront cost comparison to determine whether outsourcing would produce financial benefits. If a district's accounting system does not allow it to specifically identify indirect costs, it should attempt to arrive at a best estimate by pro-rating these expenses. There are several valuable sources of information, primarily from the Department of Education, that districts can use to estimate indirect costs.⁴

The specific dollar value of cost avoidances from outsourcing depends upon the extent to which a

⁴ [*Financial and Program Cost Accounting and Reporting for Florida Schools, 2001*](#), published by the [Office of Funding and Financial Reporting](#), Florida Department of Education, provides districts with specific guidance on identifying and attributing indirect costs. [Annual Utility Cost Information](#) and [Annual Maintenance and Operations Cost Information](#) are two reports published by the [Office of Educational Facilities](#), Florida Department of Education. These reports contain utility, maintenance, and operations costs per square foot and FTE by school district. Districts also can obtain assistance from their facilities departments that already maintain useful data on maintenance costs and energy usage by facility, and also their human resource departments that may be able to estimate the number of employee hours used to support certain services.

district transfers responsibilities to the contractor. For example, a district that outsources its entire transportation operation will avoid the direct costs of bus driver and mechanic salaries, maintaining equipment, purchasing buses, fuel, and staff training. Districts also could avoid indirect costs such as providing support services such as custodial and administrative services, certain utilities, office equipment and supplies, training, and security. Districts that outsource a portion of a function would experience a smaller reduction in indirect costs.

Regardless of the extent of outsourcing, districts need to recognize that they will still incur indirect costs for the salaries, benefits, and expenses of the employees who will oversee the contractor. These costs should be added to the price paid to the vendor to determine the full cost impact of outsourcing.

When calculating direct and indirect costs, districts should establish baseline cost information on responsibilities it will retain that will continue to support the outsourced service. This information will provide a basis for ensuring that the costs do not increase substantially after outsourcing occurs. For example, if a district retains the responsibility of paying the utility costs of an outsourced food service operation, there may be little incentive for contractors to conserve energy since they are not responsible for paying for the utilities they use. However, with baseline data, a district will be able to monitor and address with the contractor any substantial increases in these costs.

The last step in the business case analysis is to provide a structured proposal to the school board that includes the benefits, contractor responsibilities, and cost impact data so that board members can compare the costs to the benefits and decide whether outsourcing is in the district's best interest. This step should include an evaluation of whether the costs avoided are greater than the full cost of the outsourced service.

Have a plan for transitioning into outsourcing.

A school district should carefully consider how outsourcing services will affect its equipment and employees and establish a transition plan. Depending on how the district designs the outsourcing arrangement, the district may no longer be responsible for purchasing equipment (such as buses) and other materials (such as cleaning supplies). However, the district will need to decide how it will handle its existing materials and equipment, including whether these items will be transferred to the contractor, purchased by the contractor, or remain district property. A district transition plan should address how materials on hand and district-owned equipment will be handled once the contract is in effect.

The effect of outsourcing on employees will also largely depend on the arrangement with the contractor. District employees may be laid off, transferred immediately to the contractor, or transitioned out over time through attrition. Transition plans should address how employees will be affected, and include provisions for informing management and employees of the effects of impending changes, avoiding service interruptions, and assisting employees as necessary in transitioning or finding other employment.

Establish clear contractor performance and cost expectations in the contract document.

School districts should establish clear expectations for the cost and quality of services to be outsourced and consequences when expectations are not met. These expectations should be specified in the request for proposal (RFP) and later incorporated into the final contract. Proper RFP and contract development are crucial steps in ensuring that the district receives the benefits desired from outsourcing.

The final contracts should be comprehensive and precise regarding what duties the contractor will perform, and specify any related tasks the district will perform. The contract should specify a reasonable contracting period. A contracting period that is too lengthy can limit a district's future options and the ability to react to

changing conditions. In contrast, a contracting period that is too short can limit a district's ability to attract contractors in certain situations because of their inability to amortize the cost of expensive equipment. The contract also should include a mechanism for the contractor to report progress in achieving specified objectives and provide districts access to data needed to judge the contractor's performance and meet state and other reporting requirements. In addition, the contract should include both a renewal option as well as a recourse to opt out of the contract.

One of the most important but often overlooked aspects of the contract document is the inclusion of performance and quality standards, which help ensure that the contractor clearly understands district expectations and how the contractor will be evaluated. Information collected to establish performance standards will also provide the district with a basis to determine whether the district is getting a good deal through outsourcing or whether it needs to revise contract specifications, terminate the contract, outsource with another company at the end of the contracting period, or bring the service back in-house.

Contract performance and cost standards should be specific and clearly identify minimum performance and quality levels for the contractor. For example, facilities custodial and maintenance service standards should include the cleaning and maintenance costs per square foot, the percentage of work orders completed within a specified number of days, and level of satisfaction of principals with the cleanliness and condition of their schools. Similarly, food service standards should include food cost per meal, net profits, and student satisfaction with food service and quality. Exhibit 3 provides examples of areas for which standards could be developed.

The contract documents also should specify financial and other consequences for not meeting performance and quality standards to ensure the contractor has adequate incentives to meet district expectations. For instance, districts should ensure that payment to construction

contractors is based on the percentage of work completed and that a sufficiently large percentage of the contract amount is withheld to ensure final project completion. Districts also should clearly identify performance levels and other conditions that will result in contract termination and non-renewal, and preclude vendors that have not met performance or quality standards from future bids.

Exhibit 3 School Districts Should Establish Performance Standards for Each Outsourced Service

Examples of areas for which standards should be developed include:

Transportation

- Annual operational cost per student
- Vehicle breakdowns per 100,000 miles
- Number of parental complaints per week
- Percentage of students delivered within established ride time standards
- Number of reportable accidents (in excess of \$500 damage) per 100,000 miles.

Facilities

- Cleaning/maintenance cost per square foot
- Square feet cleaned per custodian
- Number of user complaints
- Amount/percentage of cost overruns
- On-time completion of projects
- Percentage of work orders completed within X number of days

Food Services

- Food cost per meal
 - Meals served per labor hour
 - Labor costs
 - Satisfaction with food service and quality
 - Student participation rates
 - Net margin
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Source: OPPAGA.

School districts that are experienced in contracting out services may be able to provide excellent advice or model contracts to other districts considering outsourcing for the first time. Exhibit 4 contains a partial list of items that districts should address in RFPs and contracts.

Exhibit 4 Issues Districts Should Address in RFPs and Contracts

General

- Scope of services
- Type and term of contract
- Agreed-upon price quotes and price adjustments to accommodate contract changes, district growth, and pay raises
- Contracting period and renewal options
- Conditions for termination of a contract
- Management costs and fees

Administrative

- Transition plan
- Staffing plan
- Employee status
- Insurance
- Indemnification
- Performance bond
- Contractor guarantee

Contractor/School Board Responsibilities

- Public records
 - Confidential data
 - Performance and cost expectations
 - Reporting performance and cost data (content and format)
 - Equipment, supplies, tools, space use
 - Safety program
 - Monitoring of contract and quality assurance program
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Source: Developed from information obtained from Florida Tax Watch.

Ensure that the contractor meets district expectations. School districts should assess their current processes and the staff skills needed to effectively manage outsourced services. Depending on the extent of outsourcing, a district may need to train existing managers or hire individuals with experience managing outsourced operations. For example, a district's facilities director may be the appropriate person to manage contracted maintenance and custodial services, but may need additional training to acquire the skills to do so. In addition, districts should ensure that they have adequate legal resources knowledgeable in contract law and experience in executing contracts.

School districts should assign the responsibility for managing the contract to a district employee. For outsourcing initiatives involving a large commitment of district financial resources, the contract manager should provide reports at least quarterly to the school board with information on the extent to which the contractor is meeting district expectations for performance, quality, and cost, as established in the contract. The contract manager should also apprise the school board members of any problems associated with contracted services and work with legal counsel to identify possible remedies.

Develop a contingency plan to be used in the event that outsourcing does not meet district expectations. Prior to outsourcing, districts should develop a contingency plan in the event that outsourcing does not meet expectations. In addition, the contract should specify the actions that will be taken if the contractor defaults on the terms and conditions of the contract. The contingency plan should seek to minimize disruption of crucial services, such as maintaining bus schedules and providing a safe environment for students. The plan may include identifying back-up services that could be performed by the district, or identifying alternative bidders that could step in and provide the needed service.

Appendix A

Specific Tips for Outsourcing Transportation, Facilities Maintenance, Facilities Construction, and Food Services

Transportation

- Require that contractors employ individuals who have sufficient experience and a good track record handling problems associated with routing, personnel, student discipline, and servicing of buses to ensure that the buses meet the required level of service.
- Establish performance and cost standards for, at a minimum, annual operational cost per student, vehicle breakdowns per 100,000 miles, number of parental complaints per week, percentage of students delivered within established ride time standards, and number of reportable accidents (in excess of \$500 damage) per 100,00 miles.
- Review and approve contractor-proposed routes for efficiency and approve any changes in these routes, since districts typically pay contractors a fixed fee per route.
- Ensure that the district employees responsible for negotiating transportation contracts have the necessary skills and experience to represent the school district's interests.
- Include in the contract provisions to buy back buses at a reasonable cost including depreciation should the outsourcing prove unsuccessful and the district needs to shift the service back in-house (if the contractor retains ownership of school buses.)

Facilities Maintenance

- Specify that the contractor use district-approved cleaning supplies and materials, such as paper towels, toilet tissue, and hand soaps.
- Specify the areas and square footage the contractor is responsible for cleaning (for example, whether the contractor only cleans classroom buildings, or whether the cafeteria and the areas surrounding athletic facilities are to be included).
- Ensure that the contractor schedules work to provide service when needed, minimize interruptions to district operations, and be responsive to emergency situations when they arise.
- Conduct periodic work quality inspections to ensure that the contractor is performing to expected standards. Examples of areas for which standards should be established include cleaning/maintenance cost per square foot, the square feet cleaned per custodian, the number of user complaints, and the percentage of work orders completed within X number of days.
- Require the contractor to provide ongoing training on new equipment/chemicals, cleaning methods, and the handling of hazardous materials.

Facilities Construction

- Establish agreed-upon costs (e.g., cost per student station and cost per square foot) and time frames for completing construction projects.
- Allow for district input throughout the design phase.
- Perform technical review of all plans to minimize costs and change orders.
- Establish a reporting schedule to ensure that projects are progressing on schedule and within budget.
- Specify that all work that proves to be defective is corrected within one year of completion data, including all work of subcontractors.
- Secure warranties for equipment, accessories, and parts.
- Provide post-construction services to include move-in and occupancy services, building orientation, etc.

Food Services

- Adhere to procurement standards specified in federal regulations pertaining to the National School Lunch Program, 7 CFR § 210, when contracting with a food service management company.
- Ensure that the contractor offers free, reduced price, and full price reimbursable meals to all eligible children.
- Ensure that the contractor maintains applicable health certification and that state and local regulations are met in preparing or serving meals at district facilities.
- Ensure that federally donated foods received by the district and made available to the contractor accrue only to the benefit of the district's nonprofit school food service and are utilized therein.
- Ensure that parents, teachers, and students have the opportunity to provide input in menu planning.
- Adhere to 21-day menu cycle the first 21 days of meal service and, thereafter, adhere to changes approved by the district
- Ensure that the contractor maintains records to support claim for reimbursement and report claim information to the district promptly at the end of each month.

Source: OPPAGA.

The Florida Legislature

Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability



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- [Performance-based program budgeting \(PB²\) reports and information](#) offer a variety of tools. Program evaluation and justification reviews assess state programs operating under performance-based program budgeting. Also offered are performance measures information and our assessments of measures.
- [Florida Government Accountability Report \(FGAR\)](#) is an Internet encyclopedia of Florida state government. FGAR offers concise information about state programs, policy issues, and performance.
- [Best Financial Management Practices Reviews of Florida school districts](#). In accordance with the *Sharpening the Pencil Act*, OPPAGA and the Auditor General jointly conduct reviews to determine if a school district is using best financial management practices to help school districts meet the challenge of educating their students in a cost-efficient manner.

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