

DISABILITY RIGHTS HISTORY TIMELINE

- 1817** - The American School for the Deaf is founded in Hartford, Connecticut. This is the first school for disabled children in the Western Hemisphere.
- 1832** - The Perkins School for the Blind in Boston admits its first two students, the sisters Sophia and Abbey Carter.
- 1841** - Dorothea Dix begins her work on behalf of people with disabilities incarcerated in jails and poorhouses.
- 1848** - The Perkins Institution in Boston was founded by Samuel Gridley Howe. It was the first residential institution for people with mental retardation. Over the next century, hundreds of thousands of developmentally disabled children and adults were institutionalized, many for their entire lives.
- 1854** - The New England Gallaudet Association of the Deaf is founded in Montpelier, Vermont.
- 1864** - The Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and Blind became the first college in the world established for people with disabilities. The institution would eventually be renamed Gallaudet College, and then Gallaudet University.
- 1869** - The first wheelchair patent is registered with the U.S. Patent Office.
- 1878** - Joel W. Smith presented Modified Braille to the American Association of Instructors of the Blind. The association rejected his system, continuing to endorse instead New York Point, which blind readers complain is more difficult to read and write. What follows was a “War of the Dots” in which blind advocates for the most part prefer Modified Braille, while sighted teachers and administrators, who control funds for transcribing, prefer New York Point.
- 1880** - The International Congress of Educators of the Deaf, at a conference in Milan, Italy, calls for the suppression of sign languages and the firing of all deaf teachers at schools for the deaf. Deaf advocates viewed this as an attack on deaf culture.

The National Convention of Deaf Mutes meets in Cincinnati, Ohio, the nucleus of what will become the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). The first major issue taken on by the NAD is oralism and the suppression of American Sign Language.

1883 -Eugenics is a term that was coined by Sir Francis Galton in his book “Essays in Eugenics.” The eugenics movement in the United States resulted in the passage of laws that prevented people with disabilities from moving to this country, marrying, or having children. Laws in many states resulted in the institutionalization and forced sterilization of disabled people, including children.

1909 -“A Mind that Found Itself” by Clifford Beers exposed conditions inside state and private mental institutions.

The New York Public School System adopts American Braille for use in its classes for blind children, after public hearings where blind advocates called for abandoning New York Point.

The first folding wheelchairs are introduced for people with mobility disabilities.

1912 -“The Kadikak Family” by Henry H. Goddard was a best selling book that suggested a link between disability and immorality and alleged that both were tied to genetics. “The Threat of the Feeble Minded” was a popular pamphlet. Both documents advanced the agenda of the eugenics movement and increased the climate of hysteria that led to massive human rights abuses of people with disabilities.

1918 -The Smith-Sear Veterans Vocational Rehabilitation Act establishes a federal vocational rehabilitation for disabled soldiers.

1920 -The Fess-Smith Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act is passed, creating a vocational rehabilitation program for disabled civilians.

1927 -The U.S. Supreme Court, in Buck v. Bell, ruled that the forced sterilization of people with disabilities was not a violation of their constitutional rights. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes compared sterilization to vaccination. The decision removed the last restraints for eugenicists. By the 1970s, over 60,000 people with disabilities were sterilized in the U.S.

1929 -Seeing Eye establishes the first dog guide school for blind people in the United States.

1933 - Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the first person with a significant disability to be elected as a head of government, was sworn into office as president of the United States.

1935 -The League of the Physically Handicapped was formed in New York City. The group organized sit-ins, picket lines, and demonstrations to protest employment discrimination against people with disabilities by the Works

Progress Administration (WPA). This advocacy eventually led to the creation of 1500 jobs for people with disabilities in New York City.

“The Man Unknown” by Nobel Prize winning Dr. Alexis Carrel suggested the euthanasia (killing) of criminals and the mentally ill by using institutions equipped with suitable gasses.

1937 - Herbert A. Everest and Harry C. Jennings patented a design for a folding wheelchair with an X-frame that could be packed into a car trunk. They found Everest & Jennings (E & J), which eventually became the largest manufacturer of wheelchair in the United States.

1938 - Passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act led to an enormous increase in the number of sheltered workshop program for blind workers. Meant to provide training and job opportunities for blind and visually disabled workers, employment practices at workshops often led to exploitation of workers at sub-minimum wages in poor conditions.

1939 - World War II began. Hitler ordered widespread “mercy killing” of the sick and disabled. The Nazi euthanasia program (code name Aktion T4) was implemented to eliminate “life unworthy of life.”

1940 - The American Federation of the Physically Handicapped was the first cross-disability national political organization to urge an end to job discrimination, call for a National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week, and propose other legislative initiatives.

1940 – 1944

908 patients were transferred from an institution for retarded and chronically ill patients in Schoenbrunn, Germany to the euthanasia center at Eglfing-Haar to be gassed. A monument to the victims stands in the courtyard at Schoenbrunn.

1941 - Hitler suspended the Aktion T4 program that killed nearly 100,000 people. Euthanasia continued through the use of drugs and starvation instead of gassing.

1945 - President Harry Truman signed PL-176 creating an annual National Employ the Handicapped Week.

1946 - The National Mental Health Foundation was founded by World War II conscientious objectors who served as attendants at state mental institutions rather than serve in the war. It worked to expose the abusive conditions at these facilities and became an early impetus for advocating for people with disabilities to live in community settings instead of institutions (deinstitutionalization).

1947 -The first meeting of the Presidents Committee on National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week was held in Washington, D.C. Its publicity campaigns, coordinated by state and local committees, emphasized the competence of people with disabilities. Movie trailers, billboards, and radio and television ads were used to convince the public that “its good business to hire the handicapped.”

1948 -The disabled students’ program at the University of Illinois at Galesburg was officially established. The program moved to the campus at Urbana-Champaign where it became a prototype for disabled student programs and independent living centers across the country.

We Are Not Alone (WANA), a mental patients’ self-help group, was organized at the Rockland State Hospital in New York City.

1949 -The first Annual Wheelchair Basketball Tournament was held in Galesburg, Illinois. Wheelchair basketball, and other sports, became an important part of disability lifestyle and culture over the next several decades.

1951 -Howard Rusk opened the Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine at New York University Medical Center. Staff at the Institute, including people with disabilities, began work on such innovations as electric typewriters, mouth sticks, and improved prosthetics for use by people with disabilities.

1953 - Los Angeles County provided in-home attendant care for adults with polio as a cost-saving alternative to hospitalization.

1954 -The U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruled that separate schools for black and white children were unequal and unconstitutional. This pivotal decision became a catalyst for the civil rights movement, which eventually became a major inspiration to the disability rights movement.

Mary Switzer, Director of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, authorized federal funds for more than 100 university-based rehabilitation-related programs.

1957 -The first National Wheelchair Games in the United States were held at Adelphi College in Garden City, New York.

Little People of American was founded in Reno, Nevada, to advocate on behalf of dwarfs or little people.

1958 - "Rehabilitation Gazette" (originally the "Toomeyville Gazette") began as a grassroots publication. It was a voice for disability rights, independent living and cross-disability organizing, and it featured articles by disabled writers on all aspects of the disability experience.

1960 - The first Paralympic Games, under the auspices of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) was held in Rome, Italy.

1961 - The American National Standard Institute, Inc. (ANSI) published "American Standard Specifications for Making Buildings Accessible to, and Usable by, the Physically Handicapped." This landmark document became the basis for subsequent architectural access codes.

1962 - The President's Committee on Employment of the Physically Handicapped was renamed the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped, reflecting increased interest in employment issues affecting people with cognitive disabilities and mental illness.

Edward Roberts sued to gain admission to the University of California at Berkeley and became the university's first student with a significant disability. As a polio survivor, he used a wheelchair and iron lung. [The same year, James Meredith sued to become the first African American to attend the University of Mississippi.]

1963 - South Carolina passes the first statewide architectural access code.

1964 - The Civil Rights Act is passed, outlawing discrimination on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, and creed (gender and disability were added later). The Act covered public accommodations and employment, as well as in federally assisted programs. It became a model for future disability rights legislation.

Robert H. Weitbrecht invented the "acoustic coupler," forerunner of the telephone modem, enabling teletypewriter messages to be sent via standard telephone lines. This invention made possible the widespread use of teletypewriters for the deaf (TDD's now called TTY's), offering deaf and hard-of-hearing people access to the telephone system.

1965 - Congress established the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York.

1966 - "Christmas in Purgatory" by Burton Blatt and Fred Kaplan documented the appalling conditions at state institutions for people with developmental disabilities.

1967 - The National Theatre of the Deaf was founded.

1968 - The Architectural Barriers Act required that all federally owned or leased buildings be accessible to people with physical disabilities.

1970 - The Urban Mass Transit Act required all new mass transit vehicles be equipped with wheelchair lifts. Implementation was delayed for twenty years.

Developmental Disabilities Services and Facilities Construction Amendments were passed containing the first legal definition of developmental disabilities. They authorized grants for services and facilities for the rehabilitation of people with developmental disabilities and state DD Councils.

Disabled in Action was founded in New York City by Judith Heumann after her successful employment discrimination suit against the city's public school system. With chapters in several other cities, it organized demonstrations and files litigation on behalf of disability rights.

The Physically Disabled Students Program (PDSP) was founded by Ed Roberts, John Hessler, Hale Zukas, and others at the University of California at Berkeley. With its provisions for community living, political advocacy, and personal assistance services, it became the nucleus for the first Center for Independent Living, founded two years later.

1971 - The U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Alabama decided in *Wyatt v. Stickney* that people in residential state schools and institutions have a constitutional right "to receive such individual treatment as (would) give them a realistic opportunity to be cured or to improve his or her mental condition." Disabled people were longer to be locked away in institutions without treatment or education.

The Caption Center was founded at WGBH Public Television in Boston, and it began providing captioned programming for deaf viewers.

1972 - The U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, in *Mills v. Board of Education*, ruled that the District of Columbia could not exclude disabled children from the public schools. Similarly, the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, in *PARC v. Pennsylvania*, struck down various state laws used to exclude disabled children from the public schools. These decisions inspired advocates to work towards the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975.

The Center for Independent Living (CIL) was founded in Berkeley, California. It is recognized as the first center for independent living.

The Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law was founded in Washington, D.C, to provide legal representation and to advocate for the rights of people with mental illness.

Paralyzed Veterans of America, the National Paraplegia Foundation, and Richard Hedding filed suit to force the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority to incorporate access into their design for a new, multibillion-dollar subway system in Washington, D.C. Their eventual victory became a landmark in the struggle for accessible public mass transit.

Parents of residents at the Willow Brook State School in Staten Island, New York filed suit (New York ARC v. Rockefeller) to end the appalling conditions at that institution. A television broadcast from the facility outraged the general public. Eventually, thousands of people from the institution were moved into community-based living arrangements.

Demonstrations were held by disabled activists in New York City, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere to protest Nixon's veto of the Rehabilitation Act.

1973 - The first handicap parking stickers were introduced in Washington, D.C.

Passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act authorized federal funds to provide for construction of curb cuts.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was passed. The law prohibited discrimination in federal programs and services and all other programs or services receiving federal funds. Key language of the law states, "No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States, shall, solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance."

1974 - The first U.S. National Wheelchair Basketball Tournament was held, as well as the first National Wheelchair Marathon.

The first convention of People First was held in Salem, Oregon. People First became the largest U.S. organization composed of and led by people with cognitive disabilities.

The first Client Assistant Project (CAPs) was established to advocate for clients of state vocational rehabilitation agencies.

1975 - The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Pub. Law 94-142) was passed, establishing the right of children with disabilities to a public school

education in an integrated environment. The act was later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

The American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities is founded. It became an important cross-disability rights organization of the 1970s by pulling together disability rights groups representing blind, deaf, physically disabled, and developmentally disabled people.

The Association of Persons with Severe Handicaps (TASH) was founded by special education professionals responding to *PARC v. Pennsylvania* (1972) and subsequent right-to-education cases. The organization advocated for the end of aversive behavior modification and the closing of all residential institution for people with disabilities.

The Atlantis Community was founded in Denver as a group-housing program for severely disabled adults who had previously been forced to live in nursing homes.

The U.S. Supreme Court, in *O'Connor v. Donaldson*, ruled that people could not be institutionalized against their will in a psychiatric hospital unless they were determined to be a threat to themselves or to others.

The first Parent and Training Information Centers (PTIs) were founded to help parents of disabled children to exercise their rights under the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975.

1976 -Amendments to The Higher Education Act of 1972 provided services to physically disabled students entering college.

Disabled in Action of Pennsylvania, Inc. vs. Coleman required that all buses purchased by public transit authorities receiving federal funds meet accessibility specifications.

Disabled in Action picketed the United Cerebral Palsy telethon in New York City, calling telethons “demeaning and paternalistic shows which celebrate and encourage pity.”

1977 -Disability rights activists in ten cities staged demonstrations and occupations of the offices of the federal department of Health Education and Welfare (HEW) to force the Carter Administration to issue regulations implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The demonstration in San Francisco lasted nearly a month. On 28 April, HEW Secretary Joseph Califano signed the regulations.

The White House Conference on Handicapped Individuals brought together 3,000 disabled people to discuss federal policy toward people

with disabilities. This first ever gathering of its kind acted as a catalyst for grassroots disability rights organizing.

1978 - Disability rights activists in Denver staged a sit-in demonstration, blocking several Denver Regional Transit Authority buses, to protest the complete inaccessibility of that city's mass transit system. The demonstration was organized by the Atlantis Community and was the first action in what became a yearlong civil disobedience campaign to force the Denver Transit Authority to purchase wheelchair lift-equipped buses.

Title VII of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1978 established the first federal funding of Centers for Independent Living (CILs) and created the National Council of the Handicapped under the U.S. Department of Education.

1979 - The U.S. Olympic Committee organized its Handicapped in Sports Committee.

The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Southeastern Community College v. Davis*, ruled that, under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, programs receiving federal funds must make "reasonable modifications" to enable the participation of otherwise qualified disabled individuals. This decision was the Court's first ruling on Section 504, and established reasonable modification as an important principle in disability rights law.

Marilyn Hamilton, Jim Okamoto, and Don Helman produced their "Quickie" lightweight-folding wheelchair revolutionizing manual wheelchair design.

The Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF) was founded in Berkeley, California, becoming the nation's preeminent disability rights legal advocacy center and participating in much of the landmark litigation and lobbying of the 1980s and 1990s.

The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) was founded in Madison, Wisconsin, by parents of persons with mental illness.

Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc. (SHHH), was founded in Bethesda, Maryland, by Howard "Rocky" Stone.

1980 - Congress passed the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act, authorizing the U.S. Justice Department to file civil suits on behalf of residents of institutions whose rights were being violated.

The first issue of "The Disability Rag & Resource" was published in Louisville, Kentucky. [Now known as the e-zine "Ragged Edge On-line."]

1981 -The International Year of Disabled Persons began with speeches before the United Nations General Assembly. During the year, governments were encouraged to sponsor programs bringing people with disabilities into the mainstream of their societies.

The parents of “Baby Doe” in Bloomington, Indiana, were advised by their doctors to deny a surgical procedure to unblock their newborn’s esophagus, because the baby had Down Syndrome. Although disability rights activists tried to intervene, Baby Doe starved to death before legal action could be taken. The case prompted the Reagan Administration to issue regulations calling for the creation of “Baby Doe squads” to safeguard the civil rights of disabled newborns.

The Telecommunications for the Disabled Act mandated telephone access for deaf and hard-of-hearing people at important public places, such as hospitals and police stations, and that all coin-operated phones be hearing aid-compatible by January 1985. It also called for state subsidies for production and distribution of TDDs (telecommunications devices for the deaf), more commonly referred to as TTYs.

The National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) was formed to advocate on behalf of Independent Living Centers and the Independent Living Movement.

1983 -Ed Roberts, Judy Heumann, and Joan Leon founded the World Institute on Disability in Oakland, California.

American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (ADAPT) was organized at the Atlantis Community Headquarters in Denver, Colorado. During the next several years, ADAPT conducted a civil disobedience campaign against the American Public Transit Association (APTA) and various local public transit authorities to protest the lack of accessible public transportation.

The National Council on the Handicapped issued a call for Congress to “act forthwith to include persons with disabilities in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other civil and voting rights legislation and regulations.”

The United Nations expanded the International Year of Disabled Persons into the International Decade of Disabled Persons, to last from 1983 to 1992.

Sharon Kowalski became disabled due to a drunk driver. After the accident occurred, her parents learned that she was a lesbian. They put Sharon in a nursing home rather than letting her return home to her partner Karen Thompson. Thompson’s eight-year struggle to free

Kowalski became a focus of disability rights advocates and led to links between the lesbian and disability rights communities.

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) was formed to provide information to businesses with disabled employees.

1984 - The Baby Jane Doe case, like the 1982 Baby Doe case, involved an infant being denied needed medical care because of her disability. The case resulted in litigation argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in *Bowen v. American Hospital Association*, and in passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act Amendments of 1984.

George Murray became the first wheelchair athlete to be featured on the Wheaties cereal box.

1985 - The U.S. Supreme Court ruled, *City of Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center*, that localities cannot use zoning laws to prohibit group homes for people with developmental disabilities from opening in a residential area because its residents are disabled.

The National Association of Psychiatric Survivors was founded.

1986 - The Air Carrier Access Act was passed, prohibiting airlines from refusing to serve people because they are disabled, and from charging them more for airfare than non-disabled travelers.

The National Council on the Handicapped issued "Toward Independence." The report outlined the legal status of Americans with disabilities, documented the existence of discrimination, and cited the need for federal civil rights legislation (what will eventually be passed as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990).

The Protection and Advocacy for Mentally Ill Individuals Act was passed. It established protection and advocacy agencies for people who are inpatients or residents of mental health facilities.

The Society for Disability Studies was founded.

1987 - The U.S. Supreme Court, in *School Board of Nassau County, Fla. v. Airline*, outlined the rights of people with contagious disease under Title V of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. It established that people with infectious diseases cannot be fired from their jobs "because of prejudiced attitude or ignorance of others." This ruling became a landmark precedent for people with tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and other infectious diseases or disabilities, and for people, such as individuals with cancer or epilepsy, who are discriminated against because others fear they may be contagious.

1988 - Students at Gallaudet University organized the “Deaf President Now” protest. I. King Jordan became the university’s first deaf president.

The Fair Housing Amendments Act added people with disabilities to those groups protected by federal fair housing legislation. It established minimum standards of adaptability for newly constructed multiple-dwelling housing.

1989 - The original version of the Americans with Disabilities Act, introduced into Congress the previous year, was redrafted and reintroduced. Disability organizations across the country advocated on its behalf.

“Mouth: The Voice of Disability Rights” began publication.

1990 - ADAPT organized The Wheels of Justice campaign in Washington, D.C., bringing hundreds of disabled people to the nation’s capital in support of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Activists occupied the Capitol rotunda, and were arrested when they refused to leave.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed by President George Bush on 26 July. Disability rights activists attended the signing ceremony on the White House lawn. The law mandated that local, state, and federal governments and programs be accessible, that businesses with more than 15 employees make “reasonable accommodations” for disabled workers, and that public accommodations such as restaurants and stores make “reasonable modifications” to ensure access for disabled members of the public. The act also mandated access in public transportation, communication, and in other areas of public life.

With passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (ADAPT) changed its focus to advocating for personal assistance services and changed its name to American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

1991 - Jerry’s Orphans stages its first annual protest of the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Association Telethon.

1993 - “Communication Unbound,” by Douglas Biklen, was published, leading to a great increase in the use of Facilitated Communication. The method became controversial when it resulted in accusations of physical and sexual abuse by teachers, caretakers, and family members of people with communication disabilities.

The Glen Ridge case came to trial in New Jersey, and three men were convicted of sexual assault and conspiracy, and a fourth of conspiracy, for raping a 17-year-old mentally disabled woman. The case highlighted the widespread sexual abuse of people with developmental disabilities.

Holland v. Sacramento City Unified School District affirmed the right of children with disabilities children to attend public school classes with non-disabled children. The ruling was a major victory in the ongoing effort to ensure enforcement of IDEA.

1995 - Justice for All was founded in Washington, D.C.

“When Billy Broke His Head ... and Other Tales of Wonder” premiered on PBS. The film gave many a first introduction to the concept of disability rights and the disability rights movement.

The American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) was founded in Washington, D.C.

The First International Symposium on Issues of Women with Disabilities was held in Beijing, China in conjunction with the Fourth World Conference on Women.

Sandra Jensen, a member of People First, was denied a heart-lung transplant by the Stanford University School of Medicine because she had Down Syndrome. After pressure from disability rights activists, administrators there reversed their decision, and in January 1996, Jensen became the first person with Down Syndrome to receive a heart-lung transplant.

The U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that continued institutionalization of a disabled Pennsylvania woman, when not medically necessary and when there is the option of home care, was a violation of her rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (Helen L. v. Snider). Disability rights advocates viewed this ruling as a landmark decision regarding the rights of people in nursing homes to instead live in their own home and receive personal assistance services.

1996 - Not Dead Yet was formed by disabled advocates to oppose Jack Kevorkian and the proponents of assisted suicide for people with disabilities. Disability rights advocates were concerned by movements to “ration” health care for people with severe disabilities and the imposition of “Do Not Resuscitate” (DNR) orders for disabled people in hospitals, schools, and nursing homes.

The Supreme Court determined that the issue of physician-assisted suicide was within states' jurisdiction (*Vacco v. Quill* and *Washington v. Glucksberg*).

- 1999** -The Supreme Court ruled in three employment cases that individuals whose conditions do not substantially limit any life activity and are easily correctable are not disabled under the Americans with Disabilities Act (*Sutton et. al. v. United Airlines, Inc.*, *Murphy v. United Parcel Service, Inc.*, and *Albertsons, Inc. v. Kirkingburg*). As a result, individuals with epilepsy, diabetes, and other types of disabilities may not be protected from employment discrimination by the ADA. These court decisions prompted disability rights advocates to begin working towards legislation that will clarify the original intent of the ADA.
- 2001** -The Commonwealth of Virginia House of Delegates approved a resolution expressing regret for its eugenics practices between 1924 and 1979.
- 2004** -The first ever Disability Pride Parade was held in Chicago and other communities around the country.
- 2005** -Not Dead Yet and other disability rights advocacy groups protested the court ordered removal of feeding tube that supplied nutrition and hydration to a disabled woman. Several attempts were made to enact state and federal legislation to protect the rights of people with disabilities in similar situations. Despite the fact that she had never indicated a desire to refuse medical treatment in a Living Will or other legal document, Terri Schiavo eventually died from the effects of starvation and dehydration.

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