

The Federal Role in Confronting the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy

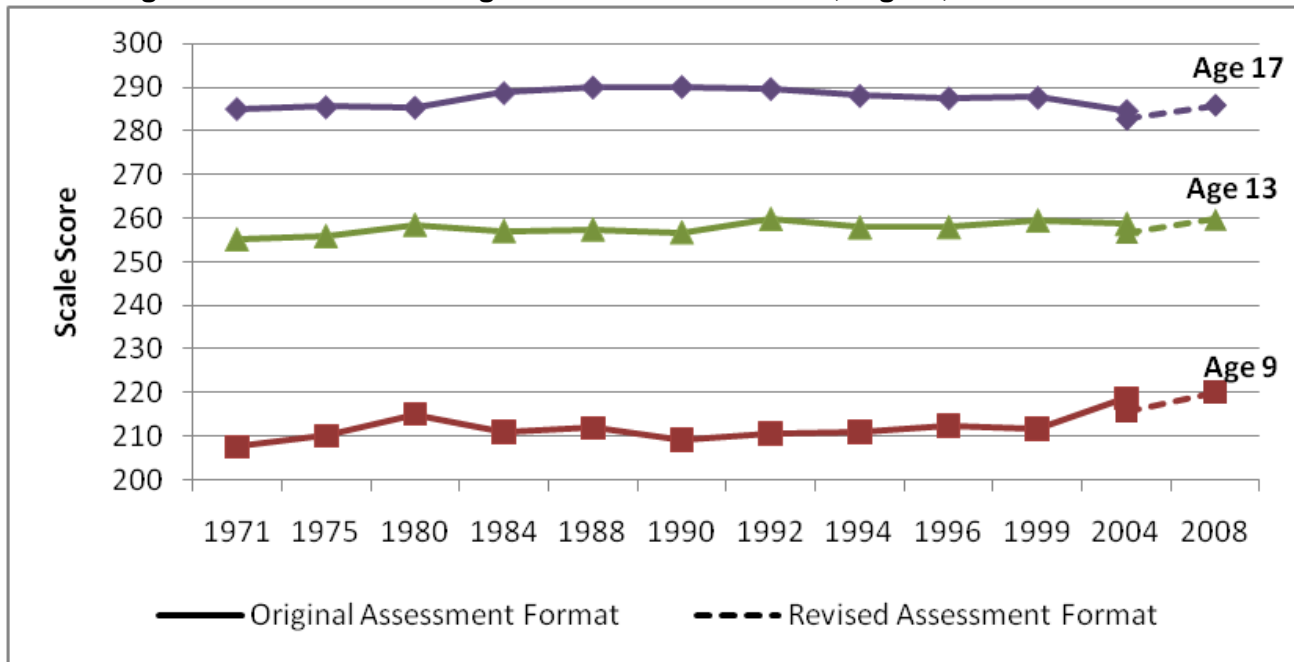
The American public recognizes that in order for the United States to compete in a global knowledge economy, high schools need to be improved dramatically. Young people are leaving high school without the advanced reading and writing skills required for career and college success. Beginning in the 1980s, reports such as *A Nation at Risk* documented the links between education, reading and writing skills, and the economy, and urged action to greatly accelerate the pace of literacy improvement.¹ Despite these early warnings, limited progress has been made in improving the literacy achievement of middle and high school students. As a result, the nation's international standing and capacity to compete globally has been seriously compromised. Although students in grade four score among the best in the world, by grade ten U.S. students have placed close to the bottom among developed nations.² Over the last thirty-seven years, the literacy performance of thirteen- and seventeen-year-olds on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has remained stunningly low, revealing that nearly six million of the twenty-two million American secondary students struggle to read and write.³

Since 2001, states have been called upon to focus on early literacy in accordance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Although Congress has dedicated substantial funds to improving reading skills for students in kindergarten through grade three, this targeted investment has not resulted in the ultimate goal of preparing students to succeed in college and careers.⁴ As a result, gains in NAEP proficiency rates for fourth grade are not being sustained through the secondary school years.

Substantial research shows that around grade four students must move from learning to read to reading to learn and contend with an increasing amount of complex subject-matter material each year. As students move through the grades, they must grapple with written material replete with technical vocabulary and concepts unique to mathematics, social sciences, history, and language arts.⁵ Without specific literacy instruction, students' attainment of more sophisticated reading and writing skills stalls.

According to the NAEP, 70 percent of middle and high school students score below the "proficient" level in reading achievement.⁶ For minority and low-income students the figures are even more disturbing. Only 14 percent of African American, 17 percent of Hispanic, and 21 percent of Native American eighth graders scored at or above the proficient level.⁷ These results reveal that millions of young people cannot understand or evaluate text, provide relevant details, or support inferences about the written documents they read. Young adults who lack reading and writing proficiency will likely be relegated to the ranks of unskilled workers in a world where literacy is an absolute precondition for success.

U.S. Long-term Trends in Reading Achievement for Fourth, Eighth, and Twelfth Graders



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, various years, 1971–2008, long-term trend reading assessments.

Uneven Literacy Achievement Within States

Upon closer examination, the NAEP reading results reveal extraordinary variability in the number of students struggling to read both within and across states. Looking at variability within the same state, major discrepancies in NAEP reading achievement exist between different subgroups of students. Even if a state performs well on NAEP overall, a difference of nearly 25 percentage points exists between the percent of white eighth graders and that of eighth graders in the state’s largest minority group scoring at the basic level. For instance, in Virginia—one of the states with a score above the national average—while 15 percent of white students scored “below basic,” 39 percent of African American students scored in this lowest category. In Colorado, another of the higher-scoring states, 13 percent of white students scored below basic, while nearly 39 percent of Hispanic students scored at that level.⁸

Differences are not seen solely across race and ethnicity groups. At the school district level, Dr. Robert Balfanz and his colleagues from the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University found striking differences in achievement levels obtained by students from high- and low-poverty districts; they found that typical students entering a nonselective, high-poverty high school in cities like Baltimore, New Orleans, and St. Louis score three to four years below grade level in reading achievement.

These figures point out the complexity of the adolescent literacy problem. The data overall are disconcerting enough, but the truly disastrous outcomes for portions of the student population by race, ethnicity, and income level reverberate through the nation’s educational system. The disparities in the achievement of different income and racial groups of students pose a considerable challenge to schools and districts in reaching national goals for college and career readiness. Even more worrisome, the average reading performance as measured by NAEP for grade twelve does not reflect the low achievement of the students who have already dropped out.



Uneven Literacy Performance Across States

Literacy achievement from state to state varies greatly as well. The lack of consistency in literacy performance rests, in part, with how states set standards under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Each state developed its own standards along with its own tests and definition of proficiency—the level of performance they expect students to demonstrate. The differences in the relative rigor of state standards shows up in comparisons between the proportion of students who reach the proficient level on state tests and the proportion who achieve the proficient level on the nationally administered NAEP.⁹ The comparisons between the stringency of state tests and the NAEP have conclusively shown that state expectations for proficiency in reading lie far below those of the NAEP.¹⁰ For example, in Idaho 94 percent of eighth graders are proficient on the state test in reading, while only 33 percent are proficient on the NAEP in reading. In Vermont, 69 percent of eighth graders are proficient on the state reading test, compared with 41 percent on the NAEP.¹¹

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a federal agency, translated each state's proficiency standard into an equivalent NAEP point score. The researchers found that most of the variation in the percentage of students scoring proficient from state to state—about 70 percent—could be attributed to how each state defines “proficient.” Students with the *same* achievement levels might be considered proficient in one state but not in another. In states with higher standards in reading, as determined relative to the NAEP scale, fewer students scored proficient on state tests.¹² The NCES study also found that between 2005 and 2007, seven states actually *lowered* their standards for proficiency for eighth-grade reading.

These findings show disturbing trends in states' expectations for students' literacy performance in secondary schools. Postsecondary success depends on the ability of graduates to understand and evaluate complex written material in technical and academic areas. In *Reading Between the Lines*, ACT found that students with greater literacy skills in high school had better achievement in math, science, and social studies on measures of college readiness. Regardless of gender, racial group, or income status, the complexity of what students read turns out to be a major factor in their ability to handle credit-bearing courses in college.¹³

Educators, policymakers, and researchers need to establish consistent high standards to ensure that students, no matter where they live, develop the necessary literacy skills to graduate from high school ready for college and the modern workplace. The current state-led initiative to create Common Core State Standards for English language arts, under the direction of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association, committed to address the serious shortcomings in how standards have been defined in many states. These internationally benchmarked standards provide a much-needed shared understanding of the essential literacy skills graduates need to succeed in college and the twenty-first-century workplace.

The Common Core State Standards along with aligned assessments can serve as a bold first step to raise the level of literacy achievement for all students in the United States. Since the 1960s, there has been a steady decline in the difficulty and sophistication of the content of the texts students have been asked to read.¹⁴ To reverse this trend, the proposed English language arts Common Core State Standards require that students receive extended exposure to subject-area text as part of grade 6–12 standards for literacy in history, social studies, and science. Subject-area teachers will need to become more skilled in the kinds of reading and writing that are essential to their own academic content areas. They will need to do much more to foster students' abilities to read technical text, subject-matter



material, and digital content independently. Despite an extensive research base on what works to improve adolescent literacy, however, secondary school teachers traditionally receive meager training and support to help students use text structures and graphic organizers, craft oral and written arguments using evidence, and work cooperatively on inquiry based projects.

Certainly, instituting necessary high-level literacy through rigorous state standards serves as an important first step; yet the magnitude of the challenge presented in their implementation cannot be overstated. States and districts will need to craft plans with multiple elements to address the lack of schoolwide literacy instruction and different types of support required for struggling readers. Policy leaders must ensure that high schools have well-prepared teachers who have adequate knowledge of reading and writing within their subject area. Teachers need extensive training and guidance to identify which skills to emphasize and how to teach them depending on the individual needs of learners. Recent studies and surveys of secondary school teacher knowledge about reading development and difficulties show that many are not prepared to teach or incorporate literacy strategies. Indeed, for more than fifty years the realities of student reading difficulties and secondary school teachers' lack of preparation to address them have been well documented.¹⁵

Universities and licensing programs have seriously underestimated the knowledge and training middle and high school teachers need. At best, teacher preparation programs generally require teacher candidates to take only a single course to meet preservice requirements. The persistent chasm between research and practice has dire consequences for students at all levels. As a literacy report from the Education Alliance at Brown University states, “Despite what we know, there is a large breach between research and practice—and a marked reluctance on the part of many middle and high schools to focus on literacy support at the district, school, or even departmental level. And, therefore, despite the urgency, there is limited understanding of how to bring these effective literacy strategies to life in the content-area classroom in ways that will make a positive difference for students.”¹⁶

Unless the nation makes a consistent investment toward delivering comprehensive reading and writing instruction throughout the pre-K–12 grade span, a large proportion of low-income students and students of color will remain sidelined from full participation in the modern workplace. These disparities in achievement have roots both in out-of-school experiences and deep in the structures of high schools. Studies show that school-based factors such as the rigor of the curriculum, percentage of secondary level courses taught by out-of-field teachers, and access to advanced classes tend to exacerbate differences found in students' home environments.¹⁷ When faced with students who struggle to read, high school teachers who lack sufficient training in integrating literacy into content areas tend to water down the curriculum and reduce the task demands on students to analyze and synthesize content-area material.

Without consistent content-area literacy support, many students lose ground because of limited background knowledge and a lack of reading strategies to comprehend concepts introduced in textbooks. English learners face considerable challenges in dealing with text structures and subject-specific vocabulary and need far more support to comprehend complex written material.¹⁸ Unfortunately, many secondary schools that serve large numbers of students of color lack the staffing and schoolwide interventions to support content learning combined with literacy improvement. Despite enormous increases in the number of English learners and students from diverse cultural backgrounds, current research shows that few teachers have access to high-quality, intensive professional development; more than two thirds of U.S. teachers responding to the Schools and Staffing Survey reported that they had not even had one day of training in supporting the learning of special education



or limited-English-proficiency students during the previous three years.¹⁹ Learning gaps worsen when met with entrenched approaches to teaching subject matter, low-level task assignments, and inconsequential teacher-student interactions.²⁰

Need for Comprehensive Literacy Plans

There is widespread recognition of the significant role states must play in making improved student literacy a priority for all students across all grades. However, researchers and literacy experts stress that simply mandating standards and assessments is not going to guarantee success. Policymakers, schools, and teachers need to step up and accept the “orphaned responsibility” of teaching students to read to learn.²¹ Since 2004, the Alliance for Excellent Education, in partnership with Carnegie Corporation of New York, has produced a series of reports describing effective reading and writing instruction that rigorous scientific research has shown to have a positive impact on literacy achievement.

Alliance for Excellent Education Reports on Adolescent Literacy

- [*Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*](#): Combines the best research currently available in a cutting-edge report with well-crafted strategies for turning that research into practice.
- [*Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools*](#): Describes eleven specific teaching techniques that research suggests will help improve the writing abilities of the country’s fourth- to twelfth-grade students.
- [*Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners*](#): Makes a powerful case for particular teaching practices and educational policies designed to help English language learners master the reading and writing skills they need to succeed in high school, college, and the workforce.
- [*Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas: Getting to the Core of Middle and High School Improvement*](#): Contends that if students are to be truly prepared for the sophisticated intellectual demands of college, work, and citizenship, they must be taught the advanced literacy skills that will enable them to succeed in the academic content areas—particularly the core content areas of math, science, English, and history.
- [*Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading*](#): Identifies instructional practices in writing shown to improve students’ reading abilities and recommends ways that teachers can improve students’ reading skills through the teaching of writing.

In the seminal Alliance for Excellent Education report *Reading Next*, Biancarosa and Snow conclude that “enough is already known about adolescent literacy—both the nature of the problems of struggling readers and the types of interventions and approaches to address these needs—in order to act immediately on a broad scale.”²² Since the publication of this report, along with others from prominent organizations, a number of initiatives have been launched at all levels of government to develop literacy policies and programming. In 2006, recognizing the critical need to learn more about improving adolescent literacy, the federal government established the Striving Readers program to support literacy interventions in the upper grades. The program currently operates in eight pilot sites—six large school districts, one consortium of multiple rural districts, and one statewide education system for students in the juvenile justice system.



In a move to strengthen and scale state policies and practices, Carnegie Corporation of New York supported state-led efforts to ensure that young people in grades 6–12 have the skills for the challenging text they encounter in high school and college. In 2006, both the National Governors Association and the National Association of State Boards of Education received funding to work with networks of eight and five states, respectively. States received grants to develop policies and programming to advance adolescent literacy. These endeavors led to the development of state K–12 literacy plans, expanded professional development and certification options to bolster the number of teachers and principals receiving adolescent literacy instruction training, and realigned funding to support adolescent literacy initiatives.²³

Just Read, Florida!

Under the leadership of Governor Jeb Bush, Florida launched a statewide comprehensive literacy initiative to address poor literacy achievement in the upper grades. Analyses of the state assessment data—the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)—showed that while fourth-grade scores including minority groups climbed steadily from 1999 to 2005, only five in ten middle school students and two in ten high school students read at or above grade level. In 2006, reading became a permanent priority by funding districts through the general public school funding formula—the Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP).

Every district is required to complete a K–12 Comprehensive Research-Based Reading Plan pursuant to state statute. Florida tied the submission and approval of this plan with receipt of a school district’s allotted categorical reading funds through the FEFP. Districts must describe their oversight and monitoring role for school-based programs and ensure that leadership at the district and school levels guide and support the initiative. The initiative focuses on developing a strategic approach grounded in data analysis and research to pinpoint students’ needs and achievement goals and to implement appropriate reading instruction and interventions.

The K–12 Comprehensive Research-Based Reading Plan serves as a detailed blueprint for each school district and applies to all schools and grade levels including charter schools, alternative schools, and juvenile justice facilities. The state aligns the guidance for designing K–12 plans with the goals and elements of a “Problem/Solving Response to Intervention” approach—a multi-tiered system of supports and intervention that includes: (1) providing strong classroom instruction for all students; (2) administering high-quality assessments to monitor progress and identify students in need of more powerful instruction; and (3) designing and delivering interventions that are responsive to student needs. The plan must provide for:

- highly qualified reading coaches;
- professional development for school district teachers in scientifically based reading instruction, including strategies to teach reading in content areas and with an emphasis on technical and informational text;
- summer reading camps for students who score at Level 1 on FCAT reading;
- supplemental instructional materials that are grounded in scientifically based reading research; and
- intensive interventions for middle and high school students reading below grade level.

Since 2006, Florida has seen steady improvement in eighth-grade reading achievement on the National Assessment of Education Progress. While eighth-grade reading has remained mostly flat across the country, Florida achieved steady increases in the average scale score for eighth-grade students in 2007 and 2009. The average scale score rose from 256 to 260 in 2007 and from 260 to 264 in 2009. (For more information, go to www.justreadflorida.com.)

Nevertheless, the overall literacy achievement level in secondary schools in the majority of states continues to stagnate. Rather than addressing the problem systematically, improvements have more



commonly been made at the margins, with scattered sites served by a disparate collection of programs in secondary schools. It has been easier to focus attention on the early grades and hope that success in the primary years will translate to resolving the problems in middle and high schools.

In order to raise the graduation rate, close achievement gaps, and ensure that high school students are college and career ready, policymakers must commit to developing a comprehensive K–12 literacy initiative. Comprehensive literacy planning must move beyond the outdated notion that schools can “fix” learners; rather, secondary schools should be in the business of “fixing” or “remediating” the instructional conditions in which students learn.²⁴ Among other changes, schools must foster curriculum integration and project-based learning that provide extended opportunities for students to develop literacy competencies in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. New approaches are needed to fully engage learners using a variety of print and digital content for different purposes and products. Teachers need opportunities to collaborate on tapping instructional technologies and creating theme-based instruction for assimilating and applying advanced literacy skills. State and district approaches to improve adolescent literacy must ensure that *all* students have access to the teachers, learning opportunities, and various types of academic support they need.

Federal Policy Recommendations

It is time for the federal government to invest fully in comprehensive literacy initiatives to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared with the advanced literacy skills necessary to succeed in college and careers. The pending reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—currently known as No Child Left Behind Act—offers an opportunity to address a fundamental weakness within public education—the lack of systemic literacy instruction in middle and high school.

Federal and state policies must recognize the necessity to build capacity for educators to ensure that all students receive literacy instruction as part of content-area learning. Solutions must address the inconsistencies in what students are expected to achieve across states and districts and the knowledge and competencies teachers must bring to bear to ensure their success.²⁵

- **Support the state-led adoption and implementation of common English language arts standards and aligned assessments that integrate literacy skills throughout subject areas.**

It is clear that most states’ expectations for students’ literacy achievement and the tests used to measure that achievement currently fall far below the level needed to succeed in college and careers. The state-led initiative to create Common Core State Standards for English language arts holds great promise as a first step in providing a much-needed shared understanding of the essential literacy skills that graduates need to succeed in college and the twenty-first-century workplace. These internationally benchmarked standards promise to begin transforming day-to-day practice in secondary schools. As part of this effort, literacy requirements—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—must also be embedded throughout the content areas.

To ensure that all students graduate with the requisite literacy skills, states should set a goal of strengthening literacy achievement that is anchored in an integrated system of rigorous standards, comprehensive assessments, and evidence-based instruction. Most current state assessments do not adequately measure student growth in literacy achievement, nor provide timely or useful information for teachers to monitor and improve the learning process. Teachers need to be able to



determine how much students know and can do as well as where they might be struggling and why—and modify instruction accordingly. Ensuring students’ literacy achievement depends upon using frequent classroom measures to gauge students’ progress and adjust instruction and curricula based on the results.

Through both legislation and regulation providing incentives to states, the federal government should encourage the effective implementation of Common Core State Standards and assessments that provide measures of student growth to strategically support their progress and determine if students are on track toward college and career readiness. In consultation with states, the federal government could invest in providing curricular and assessment tools along with intensive, ongoing professional learning that clarify the connections between research-based instructional strategies and the literacy performances students are expected to demonstrate as part of subject-area learning.

- **Support states and districts in developing comprehensive literacy plans for all students.**

The federal government should strengthen literacy skills for all students by investing in state-led comprehensive literacy plans for students from birth through grade twelve. Additionally, the federal government should encourage states and districts to articulate clear, comprehensive, and actionable plans for improving adolescent literacy instruction as the foundation of any secondary school reform effort. Federal funding should enhance state capacity to improve literacy instruction by supporting state literacy teams; fostering promising innovative practices to improve reading and writing, especially for students performing below level; and providing high-quality, research-based professional development and support for literacy coaches.

While there has been a historical discontinuity in funding across the age span, the federal government should ensure that there is an equitable investment for middle and high school students. For example, as proposed by the administration, the Striving Readers program could be expanded into a comprehensive literacy program serving children in all grades. Proposals call for funding competitive awards for (1) the development, implementation, and testing of research-based reading interventions designed to improve the reading skills of students reading significantly below grade level; and (2) rigorous evaluations of reading interventions being implemented in the nation’s secondary schools, including evaluations that use experimental research designs.

Federal grant making and regulation should also incorporate the Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation Act (LEARN Act) (S. 2740 and H. R. 4037), to support robust, state-led efforts to strengthen literacy. LEARN allocates resources across elementary, middle, and high schools, ensuring that our students receive the support they need to graduate from high school ready for college and careers. The proposed legislation targets students who are several years behind grade level as well as schoolwide initiatives to support explicit literacy instruction across the content areas.

- **Encourage states to strengthen teacher education and licensure through the design of performance-based systems that ensure that teachers acquire competencies in literacy instruction.**

Teacher education and traditional licensure exams have come under attack for failing to provide meaningful accountability for teacher effectiveness. States can shape consistent high-quality



instruction by developing standards of practice and performance measures that require middle and high school educators to demonstrate effective literacy instruction.

Policymakers should support the development of teacher performance standards that integrate content knowledge and effective adolescent literacy pedagogy. Measures of teachers' performance can serve a number of policy purposes to strengthen the quality of preparation and credentialing programs, induction for new teachers, professional learning and licensure, and compensation and advancement. This includes holding teacher education accountable for the competency of secondary level teachers in integrating literacy instruction throughout content-area curricula and linking preparation with K–12 outcomes.

Federal grant making and regulation could support and invest in highly effective professional training in literacy instruction for new and veteran teachers and encourage states to revise accountability policies for teacher education and licensure. For example, Teacher Quality Enhancement initiatives under Title II of the Higher Education Act stipulate state-developed assessments to hold teacher candidates and preparation programs accountable for meeting teacher performance standards. Federal grant programs could encourage states to specify performance elements to ensure that secondary level teachers have the knowledge and skills to provide competent literacy instruction in all subject areas.

- **Invest in ongoing research and evaluation.**

Considerable strides have been made to build the knowledge base about what literacy strategies produce significant improvement in adolescents' reading and writing performance. More research is needed in order to determine the most efficient assessment of learners and how to intervene based on the nature and severity of skill deficits.

Federal policymakers could support a research agenda to promote better understanding of adolescent literacy and the corresponding pedagogical approaches to improve adolescents' literacy achievement. In particular, the number of studies on the literacy and adolescent language of minority students is limited. The Institute for Education Sciences could conduct studies to provide more definitive guidance on programs for English learners, identify evidence-based instructional strategies, and evaluate approaches for improving teaching effectiveness.

Conclusion

Adolescent literacy is the linchpin of standards-based instruction for middle and high school student achievement. While federal and state strategies have begun to focus on the adolescent literacy crisis, more than ever it is time to build upon these initial efforts. The federal government has a tremendous opportunity to advocate for a comprehensive, national, schoolwide focus on K–12 literacy. Only by comprehensively advancing students' literacy achievement will chronically low literacy levels be overcome, resulting in millions of high school students acquiring the skills they need to succeed in the modern world.

This brief was written by Mariana Haynes, PhD, a senior fellow at the Alliance for Excellent Education.

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