



Special Education in the Turnaround Context: Green Dot Public Schools in Los Angeles

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Green Dot Public Schools

Responding to concerns about the poor academic results in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), in 1999 Steve Barr founded Green Dot Public Schools. The charter management organization (CMO) started small, initially opening a single autonomous charter high school. Then, between 2000 and 2008, Green Dot opened an additional nine schools, many of them serving some of the city's most challenged neighborhoods (Green Dot Public Schools, n.d.a).

With 10 charter high schools in its portfolio in 2008 and a history of success with its start-up schools, Green Dot sought to have a greater impact on the district's students by entering the turnaround space to have a greater impact on the district's students. Its first effort was launched in 2008 when teachers at Alain Leroy Locke Senior High School narrowly agreed to convert the school to a Green Dot charter high school. Located in the Watts section of Los Angeles — an area considered to have one of the lowest-income zip codes in the state — this large school had a long history of low performance and was also perceived by some to be one of the state's most dangerous high schools (Blume, 2008).

Green Dot's shift from starting new charter schools to turning around a failing traditional

public school was a risk. Locke was larger than any of Green Dot's other charter schools at the time, and its poor performance was engrained (Green Dot Public Schools, n.d.b). Yet, within a year of Green Dot taking over, Locke — renamed by Green Dot as Alain LeRoy Locke College Preparatory Academy (Locke) — made impressive strides; academic proficiency levels rose, and classrooms and hallways were orderly (Dillon, 2010). The CMO's success with Locke positioned the organization to expand to serve more students. This exploratory mini-case examines one particular throughline in Green Dot's school-turnaround approach, which is its focused effort to improve special education and related services for students with disabilities.

Methodology

This exploratory Green Dot mini-case illustrates strategies that one charter management organization (CMO) implemented, in the course of its broader school turnaround efforts at individual schools, to improve special education and related services for students with disabilities. Green Dot and its school-specific efforts highlighted in this brief were chosen based on the following criteria:

- ◇ The organization had embarked on an explicit turnaround effort and was able to show evidence of positive growth for all students.
- ◇ The school in question enrolled a significant population (i.e., 15 percent or more) of students with disabilities.
- ◇ The organization's staff implemented an intentional plan to examine and improve special education and related services for students with disabilities.

The authors sought nominations from key state-level stakeholders engaged in school turnaround efforts. After identifying a sample of schools that met their criteria, the authors collected additional data from public sources (e.g., state and district websites, newspapers), sought permission to conduct the exploratory case, and conducted telephone interviews with key stakeholders leading and implementing the turnaround effort. Each interview was completed by telephone and was approximately 60 minutes in duration. The authors interviewed five staff members from Green Dot: the CMO's director of special education and psychological services; its special education program administrator; and, at the school level, the vice-principal and a school psychologist from *Ánimo Western Charter Middle School*, and a school psychologist from *Ánimo Phillis Wheatley Charter Middle School*. In addition, for specific follow-up questions, the authors sought input from Green Dot's chief executive officer and its coordinator of policy and public affairs.

Participating schools consented to be identified in the case study reports, and their staff had the opportunity to review and comment on the final draft for the purposes of verifying accuracy.

Los Angeles Unified School District: New Public School Choice Resolution

In 2009, the LAUSD Board of Education passed the Public School Choice Resolution to create opportunities to turn around chronically underperforming schools in the district (LAUSD, 2009). In particular, the resolution granted the superintendent authority to select either internal LAUSD teams or outside partners to take over the operation of low-performing schools or to create new schools to serve neighborhoods with low-performing schools. In passing the resolution, the board of education wanted to provide the district the ability to expand parental choice and to foster innovative strategies to address academic and organizational dysfunction in its district schools. In support of this goal, the board sought public partners to take over poorly performing public schools in the district and convert them to high-performing schools. The partners were to be autonomous from the district and fully responsible for school operations.

In response to the board resolution, LAUSD issued a Request for Proposal (RFP), soliciting responses from organizations with a track record of success in turning around schools with student populations similar to those in LAUSD's poorest performing schools. Under the board resolution, successful partners would agree to operate individual LAUSD schools as either traditional public schools or as autonomous charter schools. Either way, each turnaround school would be responsible for serving students from its neighborhood enrollment catchment area. The board hoped that new school management would radically transform the schools in order to truly serve their students. The board approved applications to turn around 12 low-performing schools by converting them to 24 new schools to be operated by a diverse range of external partners, including Green Dot (LAUSD, 2010).

Green Dot Expands Its Portfolio in Los Angeles: Henry Clay Middle School

In 2011, LAUSD released a second RFP seeking turnaround partners (LAUSD, 2009). One school targeted for turnaround was Henry Clay Middle School (Henry Clay) (Parent Empowerment Act, 2009), identified as persistently low-performing by the California Department of Education (2011). The school served approximately 1,000 students from disadvantaged backgrounds. That population, made up largely of minority ethnic groups, closely mirrored the student population of Green Dot's Locke located just two miles to the west.

A team of external reviewers scored the applications received in response to the RFP, based on criteria set by LAUSD. Particular consideration was given to organizations that had a record of success with similar students, which Green Dot did. However, although Green Dot schools, particularly Locke, served a similar student population demographically, the size of Henry Clay was a concern for the CMO. Green Dot had typically opened schools with approximately 500–600 students, a size range it considered optimal for effectively increasing academic achievement results. From its perspective, one school serving 1,000 students did not align with its instructional model (S. Campo, personal communication, March 26, 2015). Consequently, Green Dot submitted two proposals to LAUSD, with the hope of operating Henry Clay as two distinct charter schools sharing the same campus: *Ánimo Western Charter Middle School* (*Ánimo Western*) and *Ánimo Phillis Wheatley Charter Middle School* (*Ánimo Wheatley*). A number of other nonprofit organizations and individuals from Henry Clay's administration also submitted proposals, but the district selected Green Dot's two proposals. The two schools would serve the same students who had attended Henry Clay, and students who resided in the catchment area were allowed to indicate their school preference when registering. Some of the costs associated with the restart were offset

in 2012/13 and 2013/14 with U.S. Department of Education funds from its School Improvement Grant (SIG) program.

Turning Around Special Education at Henry Clay Middle School

Of the approximately 1,000 students enrolled at Henry Clay in 2011, nearly 20 percent had disabilities that qualified them to receive special education and related services. The proportion of students with disabilities was relatively high because Henry Clay served as a special education hub for LAUSD students with significant disabilities (e.g., emotional disturbance, severe cognitive impairment). To support the number and diversity of students with disabilities, the school provided a wide array of special education services.

One of Green Dot's greatest challenges in the turnaround was to immediately provide special education services at both schools in accordance with each student's individualized education program (IEP). By this time in Green Dot's evolution as a CMO, the network had individuals at the organization's home office who were able to support staff at *Ánimo Western* and *Ánimo Wheatley* to fully develop the special education program at their respective schools. Based on a review of the special education program that had been in place at Henry Clay, Green Dot's leadership quickly identified special education as a priority and expeditiously began to implement dramatic changes, which included allocating additional school-based support staff (i.e., a school psychologist, psychiatric social worker, paraprofessionals) and providing training for staff on how to support students with disabilities.

Engaging a Special Education Expert

Green Dot Director of Special Education and Psychological Services Susana Campo is a key member of the CMO's special education support team for its schools, and she was influential in overseeing the initial changes at *Ánimo Western* and *Ánimo Wheatley*. Campo joined Green Dot in 2006, after having worked in an LAUSD special day program for students with disabilities. Her initial work with Green Dot had been as a resource teacher when it opened its original five independent charter schools. A year and a half later, she was selected to work in Green Dot's home office as one of the CMO's first special education program administrators. Colleagues commented that her experience and institutional knowledge helped the network develop a comprehensive special education program for each of its campuses. One colleague described Campo as embodying Green Dot's belief that all students can learn and have the potential to achieve.

Identifying and Addressing the Urgent Need to Improve Special Education

In close collaboration with Green Dot's home office staff, the school leadership teams at *Ánimo Western* and *Ánimo Wheatley* reviewed the special education programs and services that had been in place at *Henry Clay*. They quickly recognized that their students had not been well served and that their respective special education programs needed immediate attention. For instance, under *Henry Clay*'s special education program, many of the students with disabilities had been placed in unnecessarily restrictive self-contained settings, which resulted in their being segregated from general education students and having only limited access to the general education curriculum. The new Green Dot school leadership team sought to meet the needs of

all special education students in ways that were as inclusive as possible, which they believed would yield better student outcomes. The school leaders and their respective special education support teams engaged parents and others in the community to share how they thought the school could better serve students' needs. As part of the general review of each school's special education programs, the school and home office staff reviewed the special education files and IEPs of all students in the two schools so they could then ensure that each student with a disability received the appropriate special education and related services.

In reviewing each student's special education file, Green Dot staff found that many of the IEPs were out of compliance and that, in some, the services called for in the IEPs were not being provided. For instance, staff noted that, on the compliance side, many of the student files included little to no history of what services students received in the past, and there was no uniform system to document service provision. In response to the need to quickly address deficiencies, Green Dot deployed two full-time school psychologists to the two campuses during the first year of the turnaround to help manage both the file review process and the assessment of students in order to develop new, compliant IEPs. In addition, the Green Dot home office staff quickly realized that the CMO needed to add staff to the two campuses, not only to reach basic compliance but, more importantly, to meet the significant needs of students at both schools. During the IEP review, Green Dot personnel discovered more about students' significant mental health needs and about the range of students' learning disabilities, leading them to conclude that services in both of these areas would need to be expanded. As a result, after the first year, Green Dot added the full-time equivalent of one-and-a-half new school psychologists to work with students.

Developing a Plan to Improve Provision of Special Education and Related Services

Turning the old Henry Clay into two new, separate schools meant that programmatic decisions had to be made at each school. The original school housed specialized programs for students with autism and students classified as intellectually disabled. Green Dot decided that *Ánimo Western* would host the specialized program for students with intellectual disabilities, and *Ánimo Wheatley* would serve students with autism. Resources and staff were split between the two new schools accordingly. Students with an existing IEP that identified them as having an intellectual disability or being on the autism spectrum and that also identified them as needing to be served in a more restrictive setting were placed in the appropriate specialized program at the time of enrollment. The schools work closely with parents to engage them in the success of their students in the specialized program.

While continuing to operate the two specialized programs, the respective school leadership teams began working to give students with significant needs as much access as is appropriate to the same school opportunities available to all other students, including field trips, electives, and nonacademic programs. It is part of Green Dot's mission to ensure that everyone in the school community respects students with diverse needs and to ensure that students with disabilities are integrated with their peers to the greatest extent appropriate.

Hiring Staff to Support Quality Programs

As the Green Dot network has grown, it has refined its practices and sought to create and sustain high-quality special education programs — a process that required the CMO to hire specialized personnel. *Ánimo Western* and *Ánimo Wheatley*, for example, now share

one special education program administrator, Christina Duldulao, who is responsible for overall compliance and who reports directly to Campo in Green Dot's home office. Duldulao is on each campus at least once a day, working directly with the schools' leadership teams to ensure that the special education program is effectively serving students and that special education teachers are supported. She provides direct support to the special education teachers by visiting them in their classrooms and discussing the needs of specific students. In addition, each school has a dedicated school psychologist responsible for all the annual and triennial reviews for students with disabilities. Each one has a caseload of approximately 110 students, compared to the caseload of 1000 or more students that is average for California school psychologists (Dewitt, 2013). The psychologists at these two Green Dot schools are responsible for coordinating each school's student support team and all related service providers.

Both schools employ seven special education teachers and approximately 10 paraprofessionals to support the students in each school. The number of paraprofessionals in each school varies according to the needs of the student population and the IEP requirements. To meet the intense psychological needs of some students, Green Dot hired two additional school psychologists, one full-time and one part-time, who provide intensive counseling to students and families. Each school also has a social worker and social worker interns who provide ongoing supports and services for all students. The schools have cultivated relationships with community partners to provide onsite services for students, such as social services and family counseling. Green Dot personnel characterized the community partners as vital to providing wraparound services to students who have the most significant needs.

Leveraging Network Resources to Benefit Students With Disabilities

The fact that Green Dot is a network with more than 10 schools has enabled some valuable systemization and collaboration across its schools to support development of high-quality special education programs and processes. For instance, special education lead teachers from across the network's schools met regularly along with their respective school leadership teams, and all the schools in the network used the same forms to track students in the referral process, from start to finish. All schools in the network also used the same IEP format. Standardizing IEPs at the outset ensured that student IEP goals were more clearly articulated than they were in the past and that documentation of services to students and of student progress was uniform, which had not been the case in the Henry Clay special education program.

The Green Dot home office developed and supported its own unique student-data-tracking-system. Once per quarter, Green Dot data staff from the home office gathered and analyzed a variety of student performance metrics and provided comprehensive reports on student progress to the schools' administrations. In addition to parents, all employees who worked with students could access the electronic student data tracking system. Green Dot personnel reported that immediate access to data provided an opportunity for the faculty to glean information about all students in real time.

The quarterly data analyses enabled the special education staff to examine how students were progressing socially and academically in the Response to Intervention (RTI) process and to what extent students with disabilities were meeting their IEP goals. Each member of the two schools' respective special education teams could access student assessment data, including attendance and behavior data, and participate in the referral and review process as informed participants. The data system enabled staff to

track student outcomes to determine if an intervention they were implementing was successful.

The student data system was vital for compliance monitoring because the uniform tracking system enabled supervisors to hold special education administrators accountable for providing services in a timely manner. There were also multiple supports built in from the Green Dot network (e.g., professional development, coaching sessions) to ensure that the curriculum was rigorous and that the teachers were delivering quality instruction. Green Dot network administrators and instructional staff were in ongoing dialogue about students and about programs.

Recruiting, Hiring, and Supporting Quality Personnel

The Green Dot network's culture emphasizes recruiting, hiring, and supporting all instructional staff to meet their potential. This organizational culture was evident in the special education department, where the special education program administrator visited classrooms at least twice a month to provide feedback for teachers to implement immediate instructional changes. Those interactions were described as collegial and focused on student achievement and success. Special education teachers were provided professional learning opportunities and supports similar to what was given to general education teachers. As part of their school's instructional team, special education teachers taught alongside their general education peers as needed, but they taught alone when necessary to meet the needs of individual, or groups of, students with disabilities. In 2013/14, there were 27 professional learning sessions at *Ánimo Western* and *Ánimo Wheatley* specifically for special education teachers and paraprofessionals. That number does not include additional professional development opportunities for all staff, including special education staff (S. Campo, personal communication, March 26, 2015). Four times a year, the network hosted "All Green Dot Days," providing

a full day of professional development during which all Green Dot employees working in Los Angeles participated in mission-focused sessions. The network used “All Green Dot Day” to develop and strengthen fidelity to the Green Dot mission.

Green Dot personnel who were interviewed for this exploratory study expressed an explicit belief that all children have the potential to succeed. The majority of each school’s staff members are young, energetic, and working tirelessly to fulfill the Green Dot mission. Each individual interviewed reported being drawn to Green Dot because of its intense focus on its mission and helping students succeed in life. Cora Palma and Eric Culqui, school psychologists from *Ánimo Wheatley* and *Ánimo Western*, respectively, expressed that they felt part of the larger school community and that the administration valued their “voice.” For example, Palma spoke of how the school psychologists were influential in rolling out the RTI process. In close collaboration, the general education teachers and special education staff worked countless hours to ensure that the students’ needs were met, and if a student needed a service that the school did not provide, the staff sought outside supports to assist the student and family.

Leveraging Autonomy to Fuel Innovation

When LAUSD operated Henry Clay, staff reportedly had to navigate the bureaucracy of the large urban district, which meant that making any significant changes could be a slow process (S. Campo, personal communication, March 26, 2015). Green Dot staff credit the CMO’s autonomy from LAUSD and its bureaucracy for enabling innovation across both schools — and across the CMO’s entire network. For instance, when one campus implemented a new technique or program, the other campus learned from it and quickly made changes accordingly. The special education programs at the two schools were adjusted over time as the programs grew and developed. For example, a strong co-teaching model at *Ánimo Wheatley* paired special education teachers and general

education teachers, and the school’s professional learning opportunities were aligned to support the inclusion model. The school administration and special education administrators at the Green Dot home office closely monitored implementation of the co-teaching model. When preliminary data showed that the model yielded a positive impact on student achievement and behavior (see table 1 on page 8), school leaders at *Ánimo Western* assessed their ability to adopt the same model. However, they concluded that to successfully implement the co-teaching model, their existing staff would need further professional development and the school would need additional staff.

Creating a Multitiered System of Supports and Safe and Civil Schools

After one year of turnaround, student outcome data showed signs of improvement for the students in the two new Green Dot schools. However, Green Dot did not rest on its laurels; it continued to refine its educational program. Data and program analysis over the 2014/15 school year indicated that the majority of all students at both *Ánimo Western* and *Ánimo Wheatley*, not just those in special education, had academic weaknesses that needed to be addressed. Additionally, many students exhibited social and emotional distress stemming from living in a community that had experienced disruption due to violence on the streets or from living in a home where there was violence. Green Dot’s response was to introduce two new initiatives in the 2015/16 school year to address the academic and social/emotional needs of the overall population: 1) a multitiered System of Supports (MTSS), and 2) the Safe and Civil Schools program.

During summer 2015, the two schools introduced, and trained staff about the importance of using MTSS for all students. In previous school years, the schools had used a form of MTSS/Response to Intervention (RTI) with their respective at-risk populations and their students with

Table 1. Pre-Restart and Post-Restart Data ^a**Henry Clay Middle School Baseline Pre-Restart ^b**

School Year	Total Enrollment	% Special Education	% Free & Reduced-Price Meals ^c	% School Proficiency English Language Arts (ELA)	% Proficiency of Students With Disabilities ELA	% School Proficiency Math	% Proficiency of Students with Disabilities Math	API
2009/10	1,104	17.3	89.7	17.6	10.2	11.6	11.9	538
2010/11	980	18.5	100.0	17.9	13.8	12.0	15.6	553

Ánimo Phillis Wheatley Charter Middle School: Post-Restart

School Year	Total Enrollment	% Special Education	% Free & Reduced-Price Meals ^c	% School Proficiency English Language Arts (ELA)	% Proficiency of Students With Disabilities ELA	% School Proficiency Math	% Proficiency of Students with Disabilities Math	API
2011/12	512	17	71.0	16.7	11.5	16.8	14.3	593
2012/13	583	14	81.4	25.2	17.4	22.6	18.7	629
2013/14*	612	17	95.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Ánimo Western Charter Middle School: Post-Restart

School Year	Total Enrollment	% Special Education	% Free & Reduced-Price Meals ^c	% School Proficiency English Language Arts (ELA)	% Proficiency of Students With Disabilities ELA	% School Proficiency Math	% Proficiency of Students with Disabilities Math	API
2011/12	532	16.5	88.2	29.8	29.3	24.8	24.3	656
2012/13	590	17.5	88.1	34.1	33.3	25.9	22.4	694
2013/14*	616	16.0	95.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Notes:

^a Data for 2009/10 to 2012/13 retrieved from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/apireports.asp>. 2009/10 and 2010/11 data are for Henry Clay prior to Green Dot Public Schools' takeover of the school. California utilizes an Annual Performance Index (API) with a maximum score of 1,000 that helps measure school growth in grade-level assessments, as well as on the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE).

^b In 2013/14, California piloted new assessments and did not publish data. For more information, see <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/letter040214.asp>.

^c Percentages for free and reduced-price meals are difficult to directly compare because LAUSD relied on sampling, as well as Zip-code data, to determine Henry Clay's free and reduced-price lunch population. Green Dot, as a charter, is prohibited from using sampling and Zip-code demographics, but must collect each student's individual family income forms. Given the lack of history in collecting and submitting these forms, it took a couple of years to get families to understand the importance of submitting the forms. The difference in free and reduced-price lunch figures appears to be driven more by this change in form-collection methodology than anything else.

disabilities. However, it was not until the 2015/16 school year that MTSS was fully implemented for all students. According to Green Dot's training materials, MTSS is a robust method for systematically tracking changing student needs and responses to interventions in academic, behavioral, social, and emotional learning. Green Dot staff projected that if MTSS is implemented with fidelity, it will be a key to ensuring a college-going culture and productive learning environment for all students because MTSS enables the staff to track progress and provides targeted supports as soon as students falter. The coordinator of the support services team is directing this initiative at the school level, and Green Dot is closely monitoring data throughout the school year to gauge the effectiveness of the MTSS approach.

In the turnaround process, it is equally important to create a strong academic program and to develop a new school culture that nurtures and maintains high expectations for students. *Ánimo Western* and *Ánimo Wheatley* had some early struggles with finding ways to create and maintain a positive school climate. Green Dot committed to creating such an environment by implementing the Safe and Civil Schools program, which calls for developing a cohesive behavioral management system and effective classroom management procedures. Developed by Randy Sprick, the program provides administrators and educators with materials and training. Staff from the Green Dot home office and the two schools rolled out the program for the 2015/16 school year, after they participated in summer trainings.

Setting the Stage for Success

In 2013, *Ánimo Western* and *Ánimo Wheatley* met California academic growth targets (California Department of Education, n.d.). Green Dot's successes in Los Angeles, and specifically in the turnaround of Henry Clay, garnered national attention, and in fall 2015, the CMO opened new schools in Tacoma, Washington, and Memphis, Tennessee. It is currently exploring

expansion to new communities. Organizational personnel identified Green Dot's intentional and focused efforts to improve the special education program as critical to its overall success in turning around Henry Clay, and the network is now exporting those practices to other schools identified for turnaround.

Prior to its restart, Henry Clay was a large middle school with less than 20 percent of its students reaching proficiency in either mathematics or English language arts. The two smaller schools that Green Dot opened in Henry Clay's turnaround experienced different rates of academic progress after restart (see table 1). *Ánimo Wheatley* saw an initial dip in most scores and then an increase in performance for students overall, as well as for those receiving special education services. Though students with disabilities are achieving lower proficiency rates than the school's overall student population, the trend appears to indicate positive improvements over time. *Ánimo Western*, however, saw immediate large growth in achievement (e.g., an increase from 12 percent student proficiency in mathematics to 24.8 percent), with nearly identical proficiency rates for students in special education and students schoolwide. Large growth continued in its second year in English language arts, but slowed in mathematics overall and decreased slightly for students with disabilities. Nevertheless, the growth for both schools is positive and indicates positive changes following turnaround.

When students with disabilities represent a significant portion of a school's overall student population, it is not possible to dramatically improve schoolwide student outcomes in a sustainable way without improving special education at the same time. Key actions that Green Dot took to strengthen the special education programs at the two new schools were reviewing IEPs, implementing a robust MTSS/RTI program, and serving a greater percentage of students in inclusive settings. While one can argue that these and other strategies implemented by Green Dot are not particularly innovative, the CMO's focused and intentional improvement efforts appear to be paying dividends for the students.

Key Factors Credited for Driving Green Dot Schools' Success

This inquiry into the role of special education in the broader turnaround effort at Henry Clay — restarted as *Ánimo Western* and *Ánimo Wheatley* — revealed some key actions that Green Dot staff, in its home office and in the two schools, perceived as critical to success. Other schools embarking on focused improvement efforts might want to consider these factors when developing their turnaround plans:

- ◆ Examine data to identify problem areas.
- ◆ Review and update IEPs to ensure not only compliance, but quality (e.g., having up-to-date goals and supports) and appropriateness (i.e., reflecting the student's specific needs and academic goals).
- ◆ Optimize inclusive instructional settings and minimize segregated placements that limit students' access to the general education curriculum.
- ◆ Align staff hiring and assignment with student needs (i.e., ensure staffing reflects services outlined in students' IEPs).
- ◆ Recruit and hire staff who, in addition to having the necessary content knowledge and skills for teaching, are dedicated, mission-driven individuals with a consistent focus on student achievement and a strong belief that *all* students can reach their potential.
- ◆ Develop an inclusive school culture that is focused on serving as many students as appropriate in general education classrooms and that fosters communication and accountability.
- ◆ Create an organizational culture in which decisions are informed by data.
- ◆ Provide high-quality professional development that supports the schoolwide culture of inclusion.
- ◆ Implement a robust MTSS/RTI program that ensures provision of appropriate, data-driven, and high-quality interventions.
- ◆ Engage community partners to provide critical services.
- ◆ Involve parents as partners in decision-making.
- ◆ Support administrative staff and teachers while holding them accountable.
- ◆ Secure additional funding, from government and philanthropic sources, to support high-quality programs for all students.

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<http://centeronschoolturnaround.org>

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