



NATIONAL CHARTER SCHOOLS
INSTITUTE

BOARD
NETWORK

VIRTUAL SEMINAR

7 Things Charter School Leaders Wish Their Boards Knew



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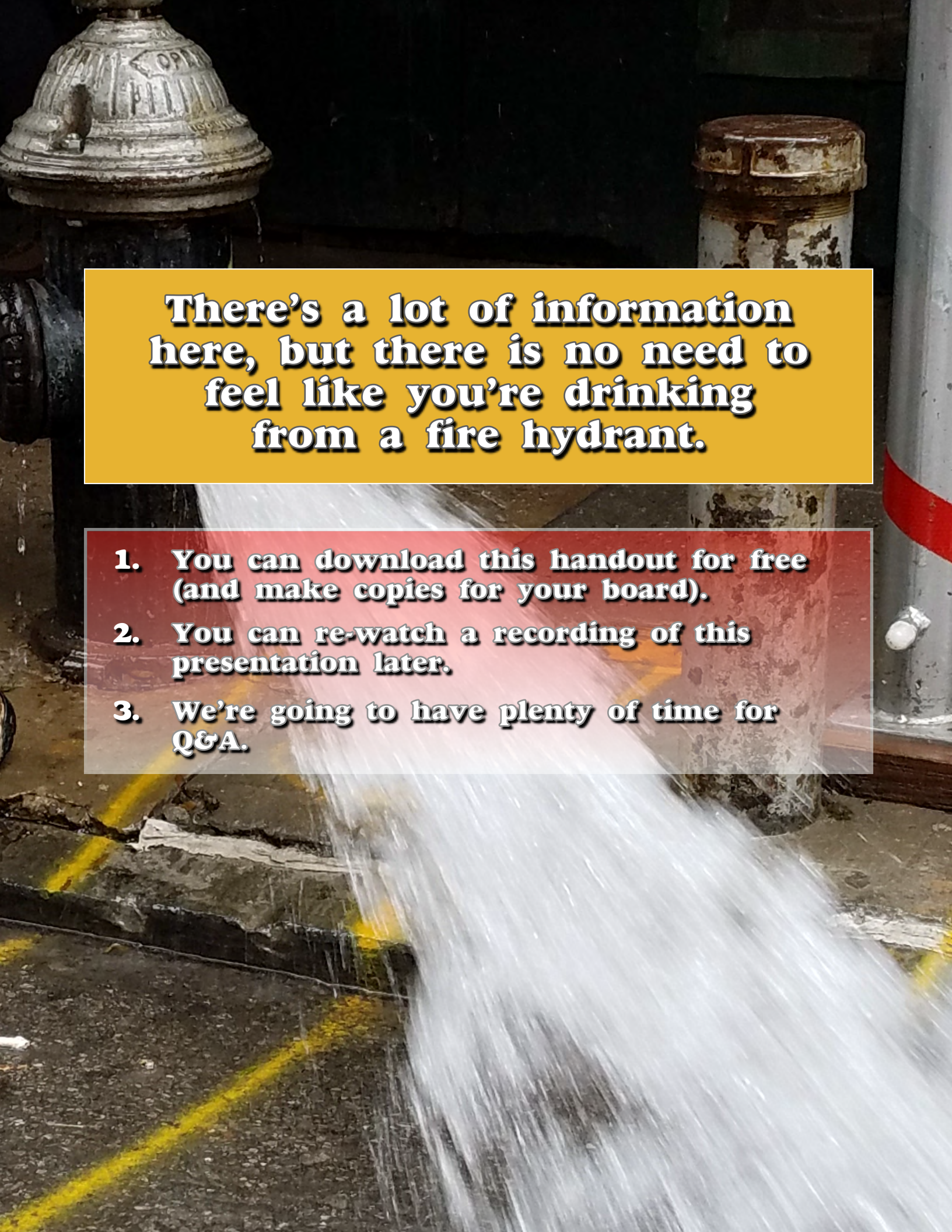


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THINGS

**CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERS
WISH THEIR BOARDS KNEW**

by brian l carpenter

A photograph of a fire hydrant with water spraying out of it. The hydrant is dark and has a silver cap on top. The water is spraying out in a large, powerful stream. The background is dark and indistinct.

There's a lot of information here, but there is no need to feel like you're drinking from a fire hydrant.

- 1. You can download this handout for free (and make copies for your board).**
- 2. You can re-watch a recording of this presentation later.**
- 3. We're going to have plenty of time for Q&A.**

TEN STARTING POINTS OF CONTEXT

1. The first charter school law was passed in 1991 in Minnesota, and the first chartered school opened there the following year. (Thus, in 2022, charter schools are now celebrating thirty years of existence.)
2. Charter school laws are state-level initiatives (not federal). As a result, chartering laws (and their ramifications) vary widely from state to state.
3. Historically, chartering has had bi-partisan support.
4. Currently, 44 states, plus D.C. have charter school laws.
5. Across the U.S., there are about 7,700 chartered schools, serving about 3.4 million children (about 7.2% of all public school students nationally).¹
6. Almost two-thirds of all charter schools are in urban locations serving impoverished children of color.²
7. Academic performance varies widely, but in general, urban charter schools significantly outperform traditional public schools.³
8. As a public education reform strategy, chartering has shown itself to be one of the most sustainable, effective reform efforts in decades.
9. **More than 3,700 charter schools closed between 1999-2017; half of all schools opened in this period closed by year 15.**⁴
10. Based on my work in the sector since 2005, I think the unfortunate data in point #9 is largely explained by four things:
 - most charter school board members never receive an orientation when they joined their boards;
 - most charter school boards do not participate in ongoing professional development or self-evaluation;
 - most charter school boards do not know how to ensure systematic risk management and most school leaders do not know how to conduct it;⁵ and
 - most charter school boards do not have a sufficient understanding of internal controls to recognize even when massive gaps exist, nor have they been trained on how to conduct robust financial oversight.



¹ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools website <https://data.publiccharters.org/digest/charter-school-data-digest/how-many-charter-schools-and-students-are-there/>

² National Alliance for Public Charter Schools website <https://data.publiccharters.org/digest/charter-school-data-digest/who-are-charter-schools-serving/>

³ <http://urbancharters.stanford.edu/news.php>

⁴ Broken Promises: An Analysis of Charter School Closures from 1999-2017 by the Network for Public Education <https://networkforpubliceducation.org/brokenpromises/>

⁵ Although I offer webinars on this bullet point and the next one, they are beyond the scope of this presentation.



The board's role is to govern, NOT co-manage the school.

In my work with charter school governing boards and leaders spanning the past 17 years, I've observed that most boards co-manage their schools rather than govern them. This leads to a host of predictable problems, including:

- disintegration of the chain of command (as the board allows stakeholders to bypass the school leader with their concerns and complaints)
- excessive school leader turnover
- instructional instability (i.e., no consistency from one year to the next)
- operational chaos and increased risk
- inferior financial performance and reporting
- litigation and authorizer investigation/intervention

Over time, a co-managing board becomes increasingly preoccupied in a sea of administrivia. As it focuses its attention on managing a myriad of tiny details (to which there is no end), it loses its focus on the stuff of actual governance.

The result?

The school becomes another "train wreck." Its charter is revoked or not renewed, children are displaced, huge sums of money are wasted, and all charter school whaaannies say, "See, we told you so."



2. A board is a collective that must act as an individual, NOT as a collection of individuals.

In U.S. jurisprudence, a corporation is an artificial person with legal standing to do many things a real person can do such as buy, hold or sell property, sue or be sued, etc. A board's actions constitute "the voice" of that person (which is why only board actions—not dialogue—should be reflected in board minutes).

The problem is, charter school boards often tend to function as a collection of INDIVIDUALS, rather than as an individual COLLECTIVE. When it comes to holding its school leader accountable, a board's expectations should always and only be those which the collective has agreed upon. There is no "I" in board, as in, "I expect," "I demand," or "I want."

How does your board make certain that it directs management with one voice?

Simple.

If your board hasn't voted, your board hasn't spoken. Boards that are serious about observing the one-voice principle even put it into policy.



3. People will stop circumventing the leader as soon as the board prohibits them from doing so.

Do a handful of parents, staff members or others frequently complain to your board or to some of its individual members without having first gone to the school leader?

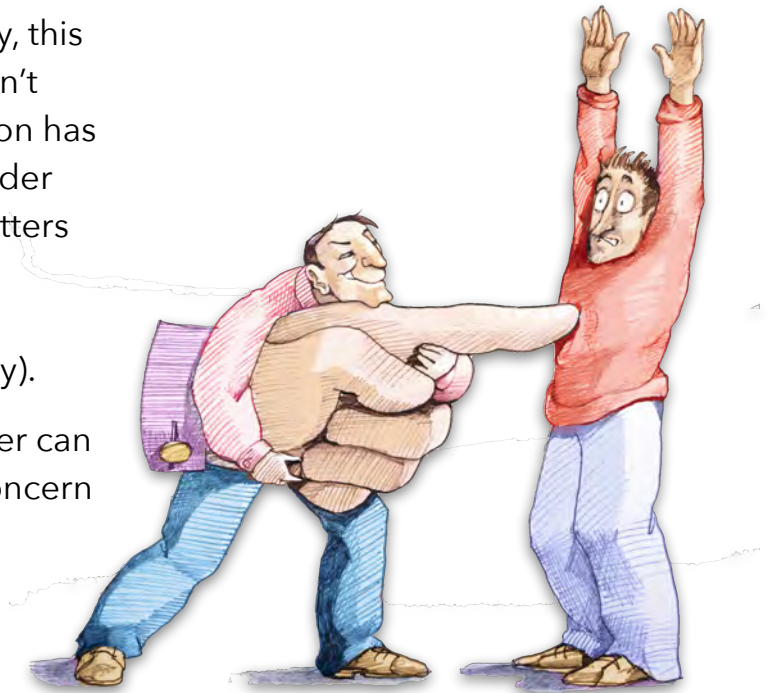
In charter schools, this occurs when the board *allows* people to bring their complaints or “concerns” directly to it—or even worse, to *individual board members behind the leader’s back*.

In an environment like this, school leaders tend to not last long in the position. Who would? The message the board is sending to the school community and the leader is, “We have no confidence in our leader’s ability to resolve issues, so feel free to circumvent him or her whenever you like.”

Be forewarned though. Boards that do this, subject their schools to constant leadership turnover which, not surprisingly, usually leads to poor performance.

A better course of action is to adopt what I call a “No Action Until Policy.” Essentially, this is a policy which says that the board won’t take action on any matter until the person has first taken the concern to the school leader (with the IMPORTANT exceptions of matters pertaining to imminent danger, ethical misconduct and things covered by the board’s whistleblower protections policy).

The reality is, most of the time, the leader can resolve the complaint or address the concern when individuals are required to take it directly to him or her.



4. High-performing school leaders do not keep low-performing teachers or staff on the payroll very long.

A school will never perform any better than the teachers in its classrooms.

Effective leaders know this, which is why they make it a priority to continuously hire, develop, nurture, retain and reward effective teachers. It's also why high-performing leaders do not keep poor performing faculty and staff on the payroll very long.

One of the worst mistakes a charter school board can make is to interfere with individual personnel decisions (e.g., discipline, promotion, termination, etc.). The board should hold the leader accountable for following **fair** employment practices, (e.g., adhering to some form of due process in disciplinary issues, etc.), but it should not blur the line between the board and the school leader by interfering with the leader's personnel management.



When a board crosses this line, some school employees will form alliances with board members who they perceive will insulate them from the school leader's authority. When that happens, the school's culture turns into a mix of *Game of Thrones* and *Survivor* and the school leader will be rendered ineffective.

As a side note, the high performing faculty and staff in your school know who the chronic low performers are. As a rule, the high performers in a charter school expect the leader to get the low performers off the bus. When a leader fails to do so after a reasonable period of time, he or she will generally lose credibility with the school's high performers, who themselves, become more disposed to leave the school—just the opposite of what students need.



5. The board president and board treasurer are NOT in the school leader's chain of command. Only THE board as a WHOLE is.

As discussed in point 2, an effective board speaks and acts as a COLLECTIVE. This principle also requires that the board refrain from diffusing its authority among its individual directors and officers AND that individual members refrain from commandeering the board's authority as their own.

In charter schools, diffusion often occurs because the roles of the board president and treasurer are misperceived as having responsibility for co-managing the school rather than to assist the board in governing it (usually because the school's bylaws are worded the same way bylaws were worded circa 1850).

Properly understood, the role of the board president is to lead the board, whereas the role of the school leader is to lead the faculty and staff. The board president is not the school leader's supervisor, coach, commanding officer, mentor or CEO.

Similarly, the treasurer's role is to assist the board in the oversight of school financial management—not to be the CFO or business manager. The WHOLE board (through its majority votes and policies, etc.) holds the school leader accountable for accomplishing the outcomes within the parameters.

Over the years, I've encountered some personality types that resist this principle. My response to them is always the same: If your board is ever sued, you're going to want to have acted as a collective.



6.

Board members are not conduits for faculty and staff, reconnaissance Marines, or self-appointed special investigators. A board should prohibit its members from acting like it.



There are few practices by board members that are more harmful to the school leader's legitimacy than routinely walking around campus, interacting with individuals (i.e., faculty, staff, students and parents) *as a board member*. It creates confusion about who is in charge, invites gossip and backstabbing and invariably leads to the formation of dysfunctional alliances.

In order to prohibit board members from taking on the role of conduit for faculty and staff, reconnaissance Marines or self-appointed special investigators, the board should adopt an ENFORCEABLE code of conduct that prohibits such behavior UNLESS the board has specifically authorized it through a majority vote for a time-limited purpose such as evaluating the school leader's performance.



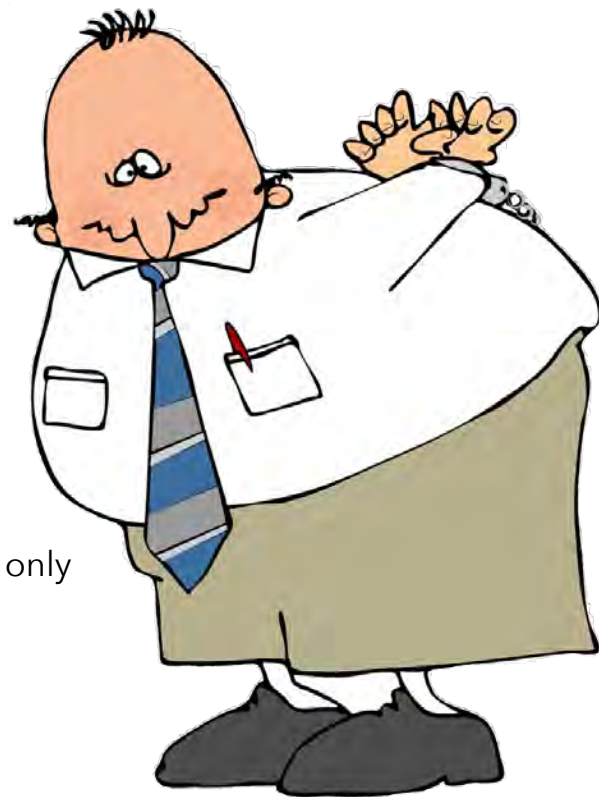
7. A school leader can only be as effective as his/her board allows him/her to be.

Being a charter school leader is one *tough* gig. For one thing, unlike their district counterparts, charter school leaders have to produce academic results—the charter depends on it! For another thing, since most charters have no central office, a charter school leader has to develop skills in multiple domains—most of which they’ve received no formal instruction in, thanks to typical masters/doctoral programs in education. (Examples include school financial management and reporting, facilities, campus safety and security, strategic planning, HR, risk management, stakeholder communications, marketing, transportation and so on.)

Even in larger schools which can afford additional support personnel, a charter school leader has to simultaneously please multiple stakeholders while making the school perform. This is often more difficult than it seems because stakeholder groups don’t always agree with each other’s priorities (e.g., what the PTO wants v. what the teachers want, etc.).

On top of all this, the leader has to manage his/her relationship with the board. This can be difficult beyond that which words can adequately describe, depending on the board’s commitment to learning how to govern with excellence. If you’ve lived this challenge as I have, then you know. Working with a board is one of the hardest jobs around.

If you’re a board member take this truth to heart. Even better, take this publication to your board and use it as an outline to evaluate the board’s performance. It may be uncomfortable for some, but your school leader can only be as effective as your board allows him/her to be.





the Board Doctor Is In™

Answers to a few FAQs

Someone gave me a copy of this handout. What is it used for?

I've used this handout for a number of presentations since 2018, both live and online.

Can I make copies for my board?

Yes, provided that (1) you copy the handout in its entirety, (2) you may not edit anything, (3) you may not sell the content.

Do you offer any other free resources?

Yes. You can subscribe to my monthly "Low Hanging Fruit" training series. go to my website and click the blue button that says, "sign up."

www.BrianLCarpenter.com I also relaunched my YouTube channel in mid-2022. <https://www.youtube.com/@DrBrianLCarpenter>

Do you have any books?

Yes, my books are on Amazon's author page, [here](#).

Do you work with individual schools, leaders, authorizers, and associations?

Yes. If you're interested, you can schedule a free, no-obligation telephone or Zoom discussion. Here's the Bitly link: <https://bit.ly/boarddoccal>.

Can we connect on social media?

Let's! I'm on LinkedIn. Be sure to indicate how you found about me in your invitation. Here's my profile: www.Linkedin.com/in/brian-l-carpenter/



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