

CHILDREN'S CREATIVE FUTURES FUND: A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR WELLBEING, BELONGING AND FUTURE READINESS

Helen Hristofski 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia is facing rising anxiety, loneliness and disengagement among children and young people, alongside growing pressure on families, schools and community services. Evidence from Creative Australia, ARACY and UNICEF Australia indicates that arts and cultural participation can strengthen belonging, identity, participation and wellbeing.

This paper proposes a **Children's Creative Futures Fund**: a national investment of **\$30 million to \$75 million per year** to expand access, stabilise specialist children's cultural organisations, rebuild workforce capacity, and improve regional and community reach. The Fund is designed to complement school-based arts learning by investing in the broader ecosystem of theatres, youth arts organisations, libraries, First Nations cultural organisations, regional hubs and community-based creative practice.

Building on the foundations established by *Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place*, this proposal positions children's cultural participation as a next step in national cultural policy development. It proposes that future iterations explicitly recognise children as cultural participants in the present, embedding their access, participation and creative lives within Australia's cultural policy framework.

This proposal also builds on earlier desktop research in my 2023 paper *Every Child Deserves a Rich Cultural Life*, developed in response to a fragmented evidence base and limited nationally consistent data on children's cultural participation outside formal education. Where the numbers are incomplete, the paper uses cautious historical and sector analysis to identify patterns of erosion, uneven access and declining specialist capacity.

The policy case is straightforward:

- Children have a present-day right to participate in cultural life and the arts.
- Creative participation can act as a protective factor for belonging, confidence, expression and connection.
- The specialist children's cultural ecosystem is valuable but structurally fragile.
- Without dedicated public investment, access remains uneven and shaped by postcode, institutional capacity and family income.

The recommended government ask is to establish a multi-year national fund, administered through a dedicated arts-led mechanism with cross-portfolio input, and structured around four priorities: access and participation, organisational stabilisation, workforce development, and evidence and evaluation.

Success should be measured through reach, equity, regional access, workforce strength, organisational stability, child participation, and indicators of belonging and wellbeing. This would shift Australia from fragmented provision toward a more coherent prevention-oriented strategy for children's cultural participation.

Investing in children's creative futures is an investment in protective social infrastructure. It is nation-building at the child level.

WHY STORY AND CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT MATTER

This begins with a simple proposition: imagination is the precursor to hope.

Before children can believe in a future, they must be able to picture one. Before they can act with agency, they must be able to imagine possibilities beyond their immediate circumstances.

This capacity — to imagine, to see oneself in a story, to recognise one's place in a community, to envision a future different from the present — is foundational to wellbeing, resilience and social cohesion. It is also something that high-quality arts experiences, particularly theatre and storytelling, are uniquely equipped to cultivate.

Theatre offers children a rare combination of emotional safety, cognitive challenge and communal experience. Through story, metaphor and shared attention, children learn to understand themselves and others. They practise empathy, perspective-taking and emotional regulation. They encounter characters who struggle, adapt, fail, try again, and ultimately find ways forward.

In doing so, they learn that change is possible — that their own lives can shift, that communities can evolve, and that the future is not fixed.

Performing arts environments create spaces where children can rehearse hope, empathy and possibility.

This is not abstract.

Research consistently shows that storytelling and arts participation help children build identity, belonging and resilience. Creative Australia's *Next Generation Now* confirms that children use creativity to process complex emotions, connect with peers and imagine futures.

This aligns with research discussed in my earlier paper, including a five-year study in New York which found that children who regularly attended theatre showed gains in aesthetic growth, motivation to action, social bridging and personal relevance, alongside an unexpected increase in hopefulness about their future. That finding matters because it gives empirical support to a claim often made intuitively in practice: imagination can strengthen future orientation.

Professor Robyn Ewing has long argued that arts-rich experiences are central to how children make meaning of their world. Sir Ken Robinson described creativity as the engine of human possibility. Elliot Eisner demonstrated that the arts cultivate the imaginative capacities that underpin empathy and flexible thinking.

These insights converge on a simple truth: **when children engage deeply with story, they learn to hope — and hope is a social good.**

A NATIONAL GAP: NO STRATEGY FOR CHILDREN'S CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

Despite this evidence, Australia lacks a coordinated national strategy specifically focused on children's cultural participation outside formal education. Access to high-quality storytelling and creative experiences remains uneven and is often shaped by postcode, school resources and family income.

My earlier paper *Every Child Deserves a Rich Cultural Life* noted that in the 1980s more than two million Australian school children were reported to experience a performance each year, suggesting a much stronger culture of access than exists today and reinforcing that current inequity is not inevitable, but the result of policy and structural change.

This is particularly concerning given Australia's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including Article 31, which recognises every child's right to participate freely in cultural life and the arts, and calls on governments to encourage appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural and artistic activity.

At a time when children face rising anxiety, loneliness and disengagement, the absence of a coordinated national approach represents both a significant gap and a major opportunity. This gap is reinforced by how children are measured within the current cultural policy architecture. As identified by the Children and Young People and the Arts (CYPA) Advisory, national data instruments such as Creative Australia's National Arts Participation Survey exclude children under 15, effectively rendering younger children statistically invisible within the evidence base that informs policy settings.

This absence of data is not neutral. It contributes directly to the under-recognition of children as cultural participants and limits the capacity for informed, equitable policy design.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT: RISING ANXIETY, LONELINESS AND DISCONNECTION

Australia is entering a period in which the wellbeing of children and young people is under significant strain. Rates of anxiety, loneliness and disengagement continue to rise, while families, schools and community services face increasing pressure.

These challenges are occurring alongside broader social fragmentation, declining trust in institutions, and the intensifying impacts of climate anxiety among young people.

These conditions shape how children understand themselves, how they relate to others, and how they imagine their futures.

CULTURE AS PREVENTION: A PROTECTIVE FACTOR FOR WELLBEING

A growing body of research identifies creative engagement as a significant protective factor for children's wellbeing, identity formation and social cohesion.

The **Children's Creative Futures Fund** proposes a **\$30 million to \$75 million annual national investment** in children's wellbeing, identity and social cohesion, delivered through Australia's specialist children's cultural organisations and teaching artist workforce.

This is an arts investment with broader national social returns.

CULTURE, COHESION AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Children's cultural engagement strengthens social cohesion at multiple levels.

At the individual level, participation in arts and culture helps children develop identity, confidence, emotional regulation and resilience. These are foundations of wellbeing and essential building blocks of mental health.

Creative engagement can function as a protective factor, helping children manage stress, express emotions, build relationships, and feel safe and valued. In a context where schools and health systems are under pressure, cultural participation offers a preventative, relatively low-cost, high-impact intervention.

At the community level, cultural participation brings families and communities together through shared stories, cross-cultural understanding and intergenerational connection. These experiences build trust and belonging — essential ingredients of cohesive communities. As Professor Robyn Ewing AM has argued, the arts are central to how children make meaning of their world and understand others.

At the national level, cultural engagement helps build capacities that underpin a healthy democracy: empathy, imagination, civic participation and future orientation. As Sir Ken Robinson argued, creativity is the engine of human progress. Those engines begin in childhood.

Culture also builds future-relevant capabilities. The OECD's work on the *Future of Education and Skills 2030* highlights creativity, collaboration, agency, adaptability and the capacity to navigate complexity as critical capabilities for uncertain futures.

UNESCO's futures-focused education work similarly emphasises creativity, emotional intelligence and the human capabilities needed in rapidly changing societies. Elliot Eisner's work likewise suggests that the arts cultivate flexible thinking, judgement and empathy — qualities children will need to navigate uncertainty with confidence and humanity.

The case for investment also aligns with existing whole-of-government policy settings. As highlighted by the CYP A Advisory, a national approach to children's cultural participation reinforces and complements frameworks such as the *Early Years Learning Framework*, the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement*, the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, and the Australian Government's *Measuring What Matters* wellbeing framework.

Positioning cultural participation within this broader policy landscape strengthens coherence across education, wellbeing, equity and social policy, and situates the Children's Creative Futures Fund as an enabling mechanism rather than a standalone initiative.

SCHOOLS ARE ESSENTIAL — BUT NOT SUFFICIENT

There is strong national momentum to strengthen arts-rich learning in schools, and that work is vital. Leaders such as Professor Robyn Ewing AM and Dr John Saunders have demonstrated the profound impact of creative learning on student engagement, wellbeing and academic achievement. Their

work has elevated the importance of arts education within the national curriculum and helped build a compelling case for sustained investment in school-based arts programs.

The **Children's Creative Futures Fund** is designed to complement — not compete with — this movement. Schools play a critical role, but not everything to do with children's creative lives can, or should, be addressed within the school system. Schooling is necessarily oriented toward curriculum, assessment and measurable educational outcomes. The work proposed here is different in nature and purpose.

Many transformative creative experiences occur outside the classroom: in theatres, youth arts organisations, community centres, libraries, regional hubs and First Nations cultural spaces. These settings offer children a different kind of learning — one grounded in identity, belonging, imagination and agency.

As identified in my earlier desktop research, one of the least visible constraints on this broader ecosystem is the shortage of skilled teaching artists and specialist practitioners able to deliver high-quality work in schools, community settings and regional locations. This is both a workforce issue and an access issue.

They provide continuity across childhood, reach families and communities, and create spaces where children can rehearse hope beyond the structures of formal education. A national strategy for children's creative futures must therefore strengthen both school-based arts education and the broader ecosystem of community-based cultural engagement.

Each depends on the other. Neither can succeed alone.

CHILDREN AS CULTURAL PARTICIPANTS IN THE PRESENT

Children are not only future citizens and workers; they are cultural participants in the present. They engage with story, performance and creative expression as audiences, makers and meaning-makers long before they enter the workforce or the voting booth.

Their creative lives are not simply preparation for adulthood. They are a vital part of childhood itself.

At the same time, the capacities nurtured through cultural participation — imagination, empathy, collaboration, problem-solving and the ability to navigate complexity — are the very qualities that underpin effective citizenship and future readiness. These capacities help children become adults who can contribute to a cohesive, innovative and democratic society.

Yet creative engagement also offers something more immediate and more fundamental: it helps children feel connected, hopeful and alive to possibility.

The **Children's Creative Futures Fund** therefore balances three truths at once:

- supporting children's cultural rights in the present
- strengthening the civic and economic capacities they will need in the future
- nurturing the joy, belonging and hope that allow children to thrive

These aims are not in conflict.

Together, they form a coherent vision of what it means for children to flourish in a complex, pluralistic nation.

NATIONAL EVIDENCE: CHILDREN'S WELLBEING, BELONGING AND PREVENTION

This argument is reinforced by recent Australian evidence highlighting growing concerns about children's mental health, loneliness, belonging and social connection.

The State of Australia's Children 2025 report by ARACY and UNICEF Australia points to widening inequality, rising mental health concerns, and the urgent need for coordinated, prevention-focused responses that strengthen the conditions in which children can thrive.

This aligns with broader Australian reporting showing that younger people are experiencing significant loneliness, psychological distress and uncertainty about the future. These are not simply individual wellbeing issues. They are indicators of broader social disconnection.

Together, this evidence reinforces what specialist children's cultural organisations see every day: children need places beyond the school gates where they can explore identity, connect with peers, encounter diverse perspectives, and experience joy, agency and belonging.

Cultural participation is not a peripheral extra. It is part of the social infrastructure that helps children feel connected, resilient and hopeful.

GLOBAL EVIDENCE: WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION AND INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

The international evidence reinforces our national picture.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that around one in seven adolescents aged 10–19 experiences a mental disorder. WHO identifies supportive family, school and community environments, opportunities for participation, and protective social conditions as critical to child and adolescent mental health. These findings strengthen the case for a national children's cultural strategy in Australia.

Creative engagement can contribute directly to precisely the kinds of protective, relational and identity-forming experiences that international health and child development frameworks identify as critical to long-term wellbeing.

Investing in children's cultural lives is therefore both aspirational and preventative. It helps build resilience before crisis and may reduce pressure on health and education systems over time.

AUSTRALIA'S SPECIALIST CHILDREN'S CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM

Australia has a highly skilled, internationally respected — and increasingly fragile — ecosystem of specialist organisations and artists working with children and young people.

These include children's theatre companies such as Australian Youth Theatre Company, Barking Gecko, Polyglot, Patch, Monkey Baa, Slingsby, Corrugated Iron, Imaginary, Windmill, Terrapin, Sensorium Theatre, Western Edge, St Martins, The House that Dan Built, WAYTCO, and Spare Parts. They include youth orchestras such as AYO, WAYO, SYO, QYO, AdYO, CYO and TYO. They include

youth dance and circus organisations such as Circus WA and Flipside Circus; First Nations-led organisations such as Digi Youth Arts; regional youth arts organisations including Arena, JUTE and Corrugated Iron Youth Arts; and the freelance and teaching artist workforce that forms the backbone of delivery across schools, libraries, youth justice settings, health environments and centres.

These artists and organisations hold deep expertise in:

- child development
- trauma-informed practice
- cultural safety
- disability inclusion
- creative pedagogy
- creative producing

They are not artists and organisations working incidentally with children. **They are specialists.**

STRUCTURAL DECLINE: EROSION OF THE ECOSYSTEM

Despite their importance, Australia's specialist children's and youth arts ecosystem has become increasingly fragile.

Public and sector analysis point to sustained pressure on small-to-medium organisations, intense competition for federal support, and the weakening or loss of infrastructure across parts of the youth arts sector.

My earlier paper *Every Child Deserves a Rich Cultural Life* documented a substantial contraction in the federally supported specialist field: from 21 federally funded youth arts companies in 2007 to four funded youth arts companies and three funded theatre companies specialising in work for children by 2023. The same analysis found a marked decline in multi-year investment in children's and young adult organisations between 2016 and 2020, reinforcing the pattern of shrinking operational support for specialist practice.

That paper also documented a long list of specialist youth arts organisations that lost federal support across the period from 2014 to 2023, indicating that this is not an isolated problem affecting one artform or one state, but a broader national pattern of erosion.

Australia still lacks a dedicated, coherent federal investment framework for children's cultural engagement outside the school system.

Much of the specialist ecosystem operates on limited, short-term and uncertain funding relative to the scale of need.

The consequences are not only organisational. My earlier research found repeated signs of over-employment, under-remuneration and burnout among leaders in the youth arts sector, suggesting that children's cultural access is too often being sustained by extraordinary personal commitment rather than durable public infrastructure.

The result is structural fragility at precisely the moment when children need access to belonging, identity and creative opportunity.

MARKET FAILURE: WHY GOVERNMENT MUST ACT

A national children's cultural strategy must recognise a central reality: **high-quality live performance and participatory arts for children and young people are unlikely to be delivered equitably or at sufficient scale by the market alone.**

The issue is not that children's culture lacks value; it is that the forms of practice with the greatest developmental and equity value often involve smaller audiences, higher relational intensity, specialist expertise and delivery settings that do not generate commercial returns.

Specialist organisations typically operate with:

- smaller audience volumes than mass-market children's media
- higher per-program delivery and production costs
- specialist child-development, cultural safety and inclusion requirements
- place-based and relationship-intensive delivery models
- limited capacity to recover full costs through earned income alone

Government therefore has a distinct role in underwriting continuity, equity and national reach. Dedicated investment would help protect specialist expertise, reduce postcode-based inequality and ensure children's cultural participation is treated as a public good rather than a residual outcome of the wider adult arts economy.

The case of WA Youth Orchestra, discussed in my earlier paper, illustrates this distortion clearly. With 400+ members, 27,000 live patrons across 160 suburbs, an annual turnover of about \$850,000 and only three FTE staff, it demonstrates both the reach and the efficiency of specialist youth organisations. Yet examples like this have often operated with limited and unstable public support despite their workforce, participation and community value.

COMMERCIAL SUCCESS ≠ CULTURAL HEALTH: THE BLUEY QUESTION

It is important to distinguish between commercially successful children's media — including children's literature, animation and global franchises such as *Bluey* — and the specialist not-for-profit organisations that create live performance and participatory developmental arts experiences for children.

Commercial children's media succeeds because it reaches mass audiences and can generate significant revenue through broadcasting, publishing, licensing and merchandising.

By contrast, children's performing arts, youth arts and community-based creative programs operate through fundamentally different economic and social models.

They work with:

- smaller audiences
- deeper engagement
- higher relational intensity
- specialist developmental practice
- local and community-based delivery

These organisations are not competing in the same market as children's television or publishing. They serve a different purpose and meet needs that the commercial sector does not.

This distinction matters. Without deliberate public investment, Australia risks assuming that the success of a handful of commercial children's brands reflects the health of the broader children's cultural ecosystem.

It does not. Commercial success in one part of the children's media landscape cannot be taken as evidence that children's cultural rights, access or developmental needs are being adequately met.

THE IRREPLACEABLE VALUE OF LIVE PERFORMANCE

Australia rightly celebrates the global success of children's literature and screen productions such as *Bluey*. These examples demonstrate what is possible when creative excellence and commercial conditions align.

But they are the exception, not the infrastructure. Crucially, they cannot replace the unique developmental value of live performance and participatory arts.

Live performance offers children something screen and print cannot:

- shared attention
- embodied experience
- emotional co-regulation
- collective meaning-making
- the experience of encountering story in real time with others

These experiences build empathy, belonging and social understanding in ways that are fundamentally relational. **These experiences are not infinitely scalable. They are not easily commercialised. And that is precisely why they matter.**

The existence of successful children's commercial media should not obscure the reality that live performance and participatory arts for children are public goods.

Like libraries, parks and public education, they require deliberate public investment if equitable access is to be realised.

THE ECONOMIC LOGIC: PREVENTION VS CRISIS SPENDING

The economic logic is equally compelling. Published reporting and related analysis indicate that youth detention carries very high public cost, including in Western Australia where incarceration of a single child can cost up to \$1 million per year. This comparison should be used carefully, but it helps illuminate the broader policy imbalance between late-stage crisis spending and earlier investment in protective, community-based infrastructure.

By contrast, the annual operating budget of a specialist youth arts organisation may sit at a fraction of that amount while reaching hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of children and young people each year.

The comparison is not direct, and it should not be overstated. Detention and cultural programs serve different purposes. The relevant point is strategic: governments routinely spend heavily at the point of crisis, while investment in early, relational and preventive infrastructure remains comparatively limited.

INTERNATIONAL BENCHMARK: NORWAY'S CULTURAL SCHOOLBAG

Norway's *Den kulturelle skolesekken* (*The Cultural Schoolbag*) provides a compelling international example of sustained public investment in children's cultural participation.

As outlined in my earlier paper *Every Child Deserves a Rich Cultural Life*, Norway's *Den kulturelle skolesekken* reaches approximately 840,000 students, achieves near-universal coverage in primary and lower secondary schooling, and provides an average of 11 artistic engagements per school each year. It demonstrates how cultural participation can be treated as core public infrastructure rather than discretionary enrichment.

While Australia's geography, governance arrangements and cultural context differ significantly, the principle is instructive: **sustained national investment in children's cultural engagement can be delivered at scale, with equity and access as explicit policy objectives.**

The Norwegian model is not a blueprint for direct replication. But it does demonstrate that national cultural participation strategies for children are both feasible and politically sustainable when treated as public infrastructure rather than optional enrichment.

THE CHILDREN'S CREATIVE FUTURES FUND: A NATIONAL SOLUTION

The **Children's Creative Futures Fund** responds directly to this gap. It proposes a national investment of **\$30 - \$75 million per year** — a scale intended to match the evidence, the need and the opportunity.

Depending on program design, delivery partnerships and access assumptions, a fund at this scale could reach hundreds of thousands of children annually.

My earlier paper also contrasted Windmill Theatre and Barking Gecko Theatre to show what stable policy settings can enable. Backed by long-term investment, Windmill was able to build new work, artistic identity, international reach and commercial diversification; under less secure conditions, comparable specialist organisations have had to divert scarce capacity into short-term survival. The policy lesson is straightforward: when government funds the field to thrive rather than merely endure, outcomes improve.

This is the level of ambition required to shift Australia:

- from crisis response to prevention
- from fragmented provision to stronger national coordination
- from rhetorical support for children's rights toward practical delivery
- from short-term interventions toward sustainable protective infrastructure

The Fund would support:

- cultural access for children across Australia
- stabilisation of specialist organisations
- rebuilding of the teaching artist workforce
- regional access and infrastructure
- First Nations cultural leadership
- innovation and climate hope initiatives

- evaluation, data collection and social cohesion measurement
- partnerships across education, health and community sectors

It would also help reduce pressure on overstretched schools and mental health systems by strengthening protective community infrastructure.

This is not a marginal intervention. It is foundational infrastructure for children's belonging, wellbeing and participation.

FUND DESIGN: DELIVERY, GOVERNANCE AND SUCCESS MEASURES

To be decision-ready, the Fund should be defined not only by purpose but by delivery model. A practical design would position the Fund as an arts-led national initiative with formal input from education, social services, health and First Nations stakeholders, ensuring cultural expertise remains central while allowing cross-portfolio alignment.

- **Access and participation stream:** support for live performance, participatory arts and community-based cultural experiences, with explicit regional, remote and equity targets.
- **Stabilisation stream:** multi-year support for specialist organisations whose work with children is core, not incidental.
- **Workforce stream:** investment in teaching artists, creative practitioners and local delivery partnerships, including training in trauma-informed, culturally safe and inclusive practice.
- **Evidence and innovation stream:** support for evaluation, child participation, piloting and knowledge-sharing to strengthen long-term policy design.

Eligibility should prioritise specialist children's cultural organisations, First Nations-led organisations, regional delivery partners and cross-sector collaborations with schools, libraries, health services and local government. The aim is not to duplicate school funding, but to strengthen the ecosystem around children beyond the classroom.

Success measures should include: number of children reached; share of delivery in regional and remote areas; participation by priority cohorts; organisational sustainability; workforce retention and development; quality of child participation; and evidence of improved belonging, confidence, connection and cultural access. These measures would give government a clearer basis for assessing public value over time.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

A government-philanthropic partnership model could amplify both reach and impact.

Government's role is:

- long-term stability
- workforce development
- regional equity
- infrastructure investment
- national data capability

- cultural access as a public good
- First Nations cultural safety and leadership

Philanthropy can play a complementary role by supporting:

- innovation
- youth voice
- climate hope initiatives
- digital creativity
- intergenerational projects
- emerging practice
- experimentation where public funding may be less agile

This shared responsibility model aligns with national priorities in social cohesion, social inclusion and democratic participation.

It recognises that investing in children’s creative futures is not merely an arts initiative. It is a foundational act of nation-building.

IN CLOSING

Australia has a clear policy choice. It can continue to treat children’s cultural participation as discretionary, fragmented and unevenly available, or it can recognise it as part of the infrastructure that supports belonging, participation and wellbeing.

The Children’s Creative Futures Fund offers a practical mechanism for national action: a way to convert evidence, rights and aspiration into a more stable system of access and support.

Building on the foundations established by Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place, the next iteration of national cultural policy should explicitly recognise children as cultural participants in the present, embedding their access, participation and creative lives as a core element of Australia’s cultural framework.

This submission is consistent with, and supportive of, the broader body of sector advocacy currently informing the National Cultural Policy process. In particular, it aligns with the recommendations advanced by the CYP A Advisory and endorses related submissions from sector bodies including the National Advocates for Arts Education, Theatre Network Australia, and the Children and Young People and the Arts Coalition.

Together, these contributions reflect a high degree of sector consensus on the need for stronger national recognition and investment in children’s cultural participation.

Investing in children’s creative lives is not only an arts policy decision. It is a decision about what kinds of public conditions Australia wants to create for children now.

BIOGRAPHY - Helen Hristofski

Helen Hristofski is an arts leader and policy advocate with over 20 years' experience across Australia's cultural sector. Her career spans major performing arts organisations, specialist children's theatre companies, education partnerships and national policy development, giving her a whole-of-system perspective on children's cultural participation.

She has held senior roles with Sydney Theatre Company and Bell Shakespeare, and led the transformation of Barking Gecko Theatre Company into a nationally recognised leader in theatre for young audiences.

Her work integrates organisational leadership, sector development and policy analysis, with a focus on improving equitable access to cultural experiences for children and young people. She brings a practical, system-level perspective to cultural policy, grounded in delivery, research and advocacy across the youth arts ecosystem.

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