

USING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT METHODS TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTION IN DALLAS:

Teachers share their views

EMILY THURSTON | JOEANN NGUYEN | GLENN L. NOLLY | ANTHONY PETROSKY



The Dallas ISD/IFL/CUE Network for School Improvement was formed in 2018 to increase the reading and writing proficiency of students in 14 of the city's middle and high schools.

With funding for five years from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Network is a partnership that involves the Dallas Independent School District and the Institute for Learning (IFL), the Learning Research and Development Center, and the Center for Urban Education at the University of Pittsburgh. Its focus is on strengthening instruction using the methods of continuous improvement.

By 2020, the response of both teachers and students was so positive that the Network expanded from 8th and 9th grades to include 6th and 7th grades in certain schools. That spring, after teachers had transitioned to remote instruction due to the pandemic, they participated in interviews about working with and within the Network. They spoke about:

- Prioritizing comprehension during English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) instruction
- Using student-centered routines to focus the classroom on student learning
- Using and adapting IFL tools for their classrooms, including adaptations for high quality, rigorous, virtual instruction
- How students responded to new texts, tasks, and ways of teaching
- How the Network supported teachers
- The power of the Network to drive individual professional growth and build a shared culture around continuous improvement

Following are excerpts from the interviews.

KEY FEATURES OF THE NETWORK DESIGN

...the response of both teachers and students was so positive that the Network expanded from 8th and 9th grades to include 6th and 7th grades...

- **Continuous improvement methods** engage educators in ongoing, collaborative reflection. Teachers use “small tests of change” as a way to define and address problems of practice. Quick methods for gathering meaningful classroom data inform the choice to “adapt, adopt, or abandon” a test of change.
- **Student-centered routines** provide structure and carry the embedded message that students aren't there to feed expected answers to the teacher—their ideas and voices are central to the content of the class.
 - **Task Sheets** clarify the purpose and organization of a lesson.
 - **Quick Writes** (informal writing about a text) jumpstart the writing process and focus students on making meaning.
 - **Pair/Trio Sharing, Charting** (recording ideas), and **Gallery Walks** (to view and discuss the charts) offer students opportunities to discuss their ideas in low-pressure settings.
- **The network structure** creates new pathways for teacher and district learning.

Comprehension first

One of the most important pedagogical shifts among teachers was in how they taught reading comprehension. A 9th grade teacher called it a breakthrough when teachers realized they were jumping into analysis before they made sure students understood the text. Among other techniques, teachers designed Task Sheets that provided students with explicit cognitive moves to make sense of text. Overall, teachers began to view comprehension as a layered, in-depth process that involves more than the individual student.



TEACHERS SAID:

“Comprehension used to be asking them who the characters are and what’s the plot. And the IFL comprehension questions are much more holistic and more geared toward collaboration.... I thought, well, that made sense. But it took me a while to get that....We were all so conditioned to think about that word *comprehension* in a different way.”
– 9th grade teacher

A teacher used water as an analogy to describe the progression of text-based tasks: “I said, ‘We’re going to read at three different levels this year. We’re going to read first for comprehension, where we really understand the plot, we understand the characters, we get the idea of the story or the gist of the story. But then we’re going to dive a little deeper and we’re going to look at [the] interpretive level, where we’re looking at either bigger symbols, bigger ideas, figurative language.... When we dive deeper and go into analysis, we’re really looking at how the

writer has put this together, what their intentions were in creating this. So that means we have to pull it apart, and we have to look at it in parts.’... [A]s a whole **I’m seeing a much quicker kind of response when we get to that more symbolic, figurative level.**”
– 9th grade teacher

A teacher worked with students to identify the big ideas in a text: “We’ve seen students be able to see those big ideas much more clearly, and relate them to the novel.... [They asked] why is this a big idea, or if this is an issue that kept coming up, is this an issue we see in society?... I feel like it’s encouraged conversation among students.... **They push each other to think**, and not just think of the very first surface level idea that they come up with.... They think more thematically.... They’re thinking beyond the text essentially.”
– 6th grade teacher

“[T]he first 30 or so minutes of class, we knuckle down, making sure we understand what is going on in this text, and then, after that, they were able to just shoot off from there because they understood. They read it, and now they’re just answering the questions and collaborating, and it was really beautiful to see.”
– 9th grade teacher

“A lot of times on standardized testing, it’s either A, B, C, or D. And with IFL, it’s more **giving them the space to think about it**. And what they think, and how they see it, and how they interpret it—there is no right or wrong answer. That is the ‘Ah-ha’ of it all because they can just think freely.... Once kids do this process, they really understand. And then, those standardized questions are not that hard to do because **they’ve thought so far outside of the box, by now, to be put back inside of a box, into those questions, it becomes a little bit easier for them.**”
– 8th grade teacher

● ● ● They push each other to think ...



Student-centered routines

Along with Task Sheets, Quick Writes, Pair/Trio Sharing, Charting, and Gallery Walks, teachers lead whole-class discussions. Both teachers and students said they benefited from the structure and focus the routines provided. Both groups also noted that the routines engaged students with content in new ways.



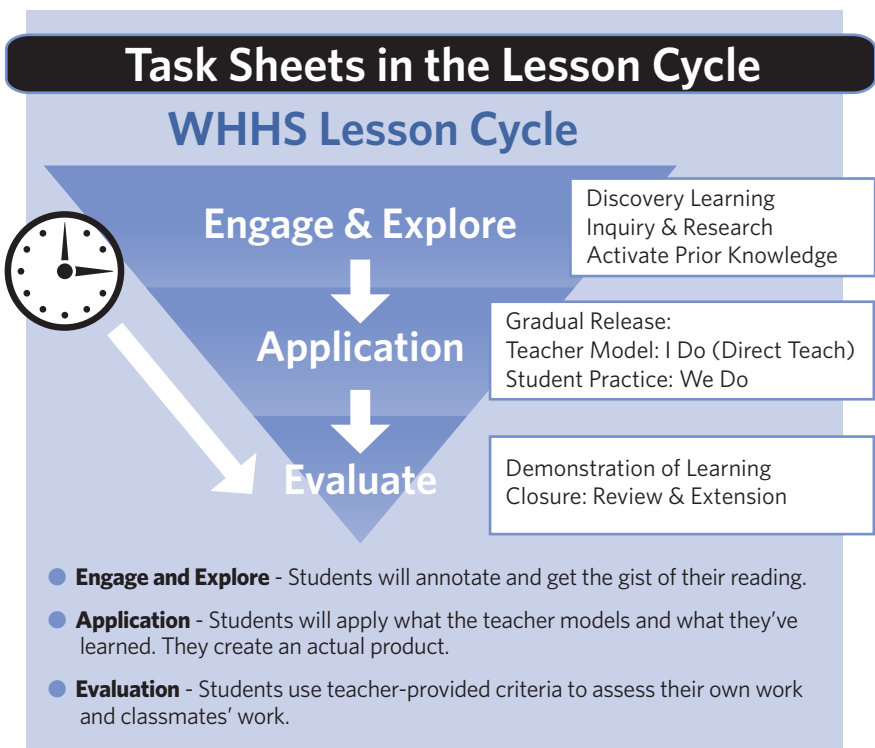
TEACHERS SAID:

"[I]n more traditional lessons, you might start with the purpose, you go over it, but then you kind of forget what the purpose is because you start doing these activities. And then it starts to feel disconnected, or you're moving from activity to activity, but **with the Task Sheet...the purpose is always there. It's really easy to just always connect back to that purpose**, for me, and for students.... So with the Quick Writes, with the collaboration, with the charting, all that kind of stuff, you're really thinking about what activities can I use in order to accomplish this purpose."
- 9th grade teacher

"I feel like the routine was so, so important because they knew: we're coming to class, we're going to do a warm-up, we're going to read a story, we're going to do the Task Sheet. And **the Task Sheet is going to require you to comprehend the story.**"
- 9th grade teacher

"I can actually see my students' personalities in their Task Sheets, when they're answering the questions. I'm like, I knew she was going to say this because in her annotation she was a little bit iffy about this character. But now in her question, or in her answer, she's writing about that character. So it kind of helped me see it in hindsight: okay, they're going to write about this in that Quick Write I gave them, and this is how it's going to be aligned."
- 9th grade teacher

"I feel that **when it's a lot more student-centered, they're grasping it more.** So whenever I'm having them collaborate and work together, instead of me directly teaching, or teaching over and over again, then it helps them be able to grasp it.... Direct teaching is great, they need that, but they need time to process things on their own."
- 9th grade teacher



Example of NSI materials adapted by a teacher team.

BUILDING A SHARED CULTURE AROUND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Condensed and edited from a 6th grade teacher leader's interview:

"First, people thrive off relationships, so I spent a lot of time just making sure that my team built relationships with each other. Second, we built culture around our values, what we wanted our PLC [professional learning community] time to look like, what we each needed to feel successful leaving this meeting, and then, how we would get there.

A lot of the feedback I got in the beginning was, 'This is not what it was like last year.' But I think a lot of those honest, transparent conversations have led to the culture that we have now. Some of them were difficult conversations. I said, 'It's not going to be like it was last year. Sometimes we've got to get our hands dirty to get the work done, and it doesn't mean I'm not going to do it with you.' So I think we built the culture with a mixture of just being true to who we are and being respectful of who other people are and what everyone brings to the team. I've also let each of my team members know that her professional and personal growth are very important to me. So I built a bit of leadership capacity by having them each lead their own PLC at least two or three times. And then we have feedback sessions on how that went.

We use a lot of different ways to build the transparency and accountability that we need, because it's good when it's good, but we have to know how to tell someone that wasn't good, and we have to talk about that. Roughly every two weeks each person gives every other person on the team some feedback about how they

experienced them the week before or in the week that we're ending, and what they're looking forward to in the week coming. The feedback never comes from just one person and it's not intended to be personal. If multiple people are saying something, then maybe there's some truth in it, and we have to explore where that leads you.

Teachers can explore on their own, and in the one-on-one meetings I have with them. In those meetings, I ask them what personal things they need to work on. Like, what are your goals for January, and how can we hold you accountable for that? Growth is inevitable, and we have to welcome it even if it's uncomfortable. In the end, it gets you what you're looking for. Teachers figure it out for themselves and reflect on their work themselves. No one's telling them what they did. I feel like I'm more facilitating their learning as opposed to owning their learning. That's the culture we're building. It all boils down to growth and transparency and accountability, and doing it in a way that shows you care.

Sometimes teachers struggle to remain objective when they're getting feedback. We've done vulnerability and trust trainings—it's just a matter of maintaining those things in the moment. They've grown a lot but it's still a challenge to understand why we're doing everything that we're doing, why we're making the changes that we're making, why we're making the suggestions that we're making. We're coming from the place of being truly for students. This is not about *my* idea or *my* thoughts. There's no *I* in this. This is all about our kids."

Adapting instruction for particular contexts

A key continuous improvement practice is to make decisions strategically based on relevant data. Small tests of change give teachers data that are more immediate than, say, an end-of-unit test. For example, students' responses to a Task Sheet could lead a teacher to reshape the very next lesson. Teachers also described adapting to a virtual environment after schools closed down during the pandemic. Rather than returning to more familiar, traditional practice, they experimented with different platforms to find the best ways to keep students thinking, participating, and collaborating.



TEACHERS SAID:

"I went to a Google slide deck, and I still keep it the same way that is on the Task Sheet. And so once they get to their charting, where in class they would usually use a piece of chart paper and put it around the walls, I put them in a breakout room. And I say, 'Whatever is your breakout room, that is your number on your slide.' So then they go and they do all of their big ideas there. I let them add pictures. I never knew that letting them go to the Internet and put a picture on a chart would be the holy grail of something.... I tell them that, 'Before you get out of that breakout room, you need to decide who is going to talk.' And so, once I get to that slide, that student will unmute themselves, explain their slide. It has worked. **I was scared to do it because... it's virtual, you never know what can happen. But they actually do it. They ask me, 'Are we going to present today?'**"

– 8th grade teacher

"I took for granted, when I was in the classroom in person, how

easy it was for me to get to know my students. You see them in the hallway. You're just like, 'Hey, what's up? How's the basketball game?' Just fun interactions, and you get to know them.... [A]t first, I felt like there was no way for me to do it on a virtual platform. So **having the Quick Writes and giving them a space to be able to just write and show who they are actually did give me a little more of a window as to who was on the other side of that screen.**"

– 9th grade teacher

"The students were so shocked when we told them to write that it was like, Oh, they can't write all of this right now. I had to ease them into it. So I had a minimal amount of writing but more questions, and then I slowly went into [fewer] questions but more in-depth writing. I would use Padlet, so that gave them a little bit of flexibility.... It would be a simple question. I asked about the main character in a story. And I asked them to just, 'Write your thoughts on that character,' and, 'What was your reaction to the end?' ...**[I]t was a little rough at first, but they kept working on it....** And then on the Task Sheet questions—I actually started

making all of them open-ended because, as you know, we had to do multiple choice 90% of the year.... And that was how I eased them into it...where it's one or two sentences to tell me your thoughts, and then it kind of revolved into 'Okay, now I need full paragraphs. We're going to start planning essays.' And so that really helped their confidence because they got to start small and go bigger and bigger and have bigger goals."

– 9th grade teacher

A teacher spoke about her scaffolds for English language learners: "That first time [of introducing a text], if I can find the audio, I play the audio.... The way that middle school students read, if there's a word that they cannot pronounce, they skip the word. And sometimes that word is the make-or-break in this whole text. So if they can hear it, they can pretty much realize what it means in context.... [I introduced] 'The Rose that Grew from Concrete,' by Tupac, and although it's a very simple poem, I wanted them to hear the audio, so they could hear the intention behind it, so they could hear the tone behind it."

– 8th grade teacher

Example of a teacher-created Task Sheet.

Analysis Task Sheet

Purpose

The purpose of this second reading is to analyze the author’s use of literary techniques to convey his message.

Step One - Read and Annotate

As you read, on the right side of your paper, identify at least five associations and highlight the text that supports your finding.

Note: Use the comment button on the toolbar above to highlight your text and enter your association.

Reminder: Associations are mental connections you make with the text. As you read, you can ask yourself how the characters feel in that moment, or how the author expects you to feel. In a word or a few, how would you describe a particular situation?



Step Two - Word Cloud Share

- Go to menti.com and use the code [REDACTED]
- Share your two strongest associations.
- Look at the board to see your classmates’ responses.
- Add two new associations that you observed from your classmates’ responses to your comments **(Please be sure to highlight the supporting evidence).**

Step Three - Respond on Google Classroom (Classwork)

Quick Write: Based on your readings, associations, and interactions on Menti, how does the author describe the turbulence between the two brothers? What does he want to convey?

Note: Quick Writes (QW) are times for you to use writing to think on the page. They are typically written in about five minutes, and they do not require perfect grammar and/or spelling. QWs help you record your ideas as quickly as possible.

While completing your QW, glance back at the annotations you made while reading. Refer to those as much as you can when you compose your Quick Write.

Step Four - Collaborate on Google Classroom (Classwork)

Read your classmates’ responses on Google Classroom. Complete the table below by answering the following questions: How was your opinion changed? What did you learn from your classmates’ posts?

How has your opinion changed?	What specific example(s) influenced your thinking?

Step Five - Revise

Revise your Quick Write based on the information you’ve learned.

Student outcomes

Student-centered routines offer teachers a variety of ways to gauge students' learning, including their annotations on a text, their Quick Writes, and their questions and comments in discussions. Teachers talked about students struggling at first with higher expectations, and ultimately welcoming the invitation to use their minds.



TEACHERS SAID:

"When we implemented [Task Sheets], a lot of my students were reacting very well to it. It wasn't difficult for them to understand. And then even whenever I had weeks where we didn't do Task Sheets, they're like, **'Why aren't we doing a Task Sheet?'...I think it was really helpful for them and their confidence as well.**"

- 9th grade teacher

"[I]t was very apparent to me how **students reacted differently to the questions we were giving them that actually made them think....** My students even said in the past all they had to do was read the question—read [what] that question was asking about. Now...I can tell if you read or not, because you actually have to write about it, instead of circling the answer.... They did complain about that part because they're like, **'Ohhh, your class got so hard all of a sudden.'...But then they blossomed....**"

- 9th grade teacher

"We've used a lot of 'Quick Write to essay' this year, which has **tremendously improved our students' writing.**"

- 6th grade teacher

"I can say that **doing the Task Sheets versus not doing the Task Sheets, I did see better work.**

I can say that—hands down—for sure."

- 9th grade teacher

Students in one class read and discussed the poem "At Dusk," by Natasha Tretheway: "And they were interacting with one another, and [they] wrote down some things that I would have written down.... Just **to see them genuinely engaged with the text and be curious about it was really great for me....** We had a text that was accessible to them, a Task Sheet that focused on comprehension first, and we spent two class periods—one on just understanding, the other one on

analysis of the language—and it was really one of the bright spots in virtual learning."

- 9th grade teacher

A teacher assigned analytical essays after students read sections of *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates during the nationwide protests about the murder of George Floyd: "His book gave them the platform to get some feelings off of their chest, get some thoughts out.... One thing that I saw a lot of, that I hadn't seen before, was **students relying on their text evidence to support their thoughts.**

Because they did have different interpretations of the book, they were more inclined to support it with textual evidence. So I think that was the best thing to come out of that—just **them having their own answer, and then knowing how to support it.**"

- 9th grade teacher

• • • they're like, 'Ohhh, your class got so hard all of a sudden.'...But then they blossomed....



Support from the Network

Teachers stressed the importance of having an “open space” for problem-solving in meetings with IFL colleagues. They valued both the tools and strategies the IFL offered and the kind of low-pressure, collaborative conversations the teacher describes in the first excerpt here.



TEACHERS SAID:

“[Facilitators from the IFL] aren’t evaluative....They’re third party and just here to help, so **we can be honest**, like, ‘Our kids aren’t getting it.’ And for them to go to the drawing board with us and help us plan out the lesson and then give us something to work with.... [I]t’s more low risk. Not that I don’t feel safe talking to my assistant principal, but to have time to talk to someone who’s outside of the bubble, who can give an outside perspective is something that’s really valuable. And just being able to speak with people with more experience, too, and people who actually really listen and try and work with you—it’s been really, really great. They just start with asking us, ‘How is it in your classroom? What’s going on? What have you guys been doing?’ And we’ll tell them, and we’ll tell them our struggles, and then they’ll be like, ‘Oh, why do you think that is?’ And we’ll talk about why, and then **we’ll all come up collectively with solutions and things to think about and things that we could**

maybe implement in our classes....

So to actually have a space and someone to ground you, to ask you to reflect, and then you actually have time to plan it and put it into motion, has been valuable.”

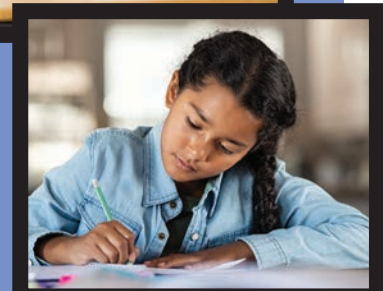
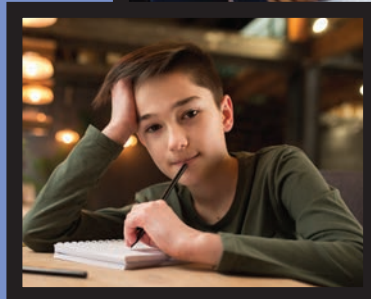
– *9th grade teacher*

“It’s nice to know that [an IFL meeting is] **an open space where we can come, and just be like, ‘I don’t know what to do,’ because it’s scary to tell someone that....**

And although at the time I’m, ‘Oh,

I have so many things in my head during this meeting’ because I have so much to do, when I come in the meeting, it’s like everything kind of clears, because [by the end] we know exactly what we’re going to do for students, what the recommendations are, and next steps.... I’d rather stay after school an extra hour to get some things done instead of not have that meeting because it’s really beneficial.”

– *9th grade teacher*



The power of the Network

Cross-school meetings allow teachers to share practical tips that other teachers have adopted, such as using Google slides for writing workshops and student journals, or providing a designated time to play games with students as a way to get to know them over Zoom, a strategy that boosted class attendance. Not only did teachers' classroom practice benefit from sharing ideas with one another across the Network, but they also felt more connected and supported in a large district.



TEACHERS SAID:

"I was invited to a meeting, and I went to the meeting. At first, to be honest, I was very much like, 'Ahh, a meeting this late at night.' I was pretty upset, but then **my mood changed throughout the meeting because I actually found value in what was being said...** It gave me a space to be able to interact with my teacher peers throughout the district. Otherwise I wouldn't have had an opportunity to be exposed to their ideas and their experiences."

- 9th grade teacher

"I love doing the work, but I couldn't really talk with anybody at [my school] about it, because nobody else was really doing it... So I had to kind of reach out and talk to other people.... **I thought, okay, I've kind of exhausted my own little world here, I want to find out what other teachers are doing.**"

- 9th grade teacher



USING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT METHODS IN YOUR SCHOOL

Continuous improvement methods offer a disciplined, structured approach to learning from practice, with the goal of improving outcomes for students who have been historically marginalized. Following is a brief outline of the major steps in the process.

Analyze a problem related to student achievement from multiple perspectives and define goals. In Dallas, Network members studied a ream of data, including student attendance, enrollment in advanced courses, disciplinary incidents, test scores disaggregated by subgroup, and hundreds of interviews with teachers and students. They also conducted an “asset walk” to identify existing strengths. They defined a goal of raising the level of instruction in ELAR classes in 14 schools.

Create a theory of improvement and identify “drivers”—factors that influence the problem. A theory of improvement must be based on practices supported by research. Identifying primary and secondary drivers helps to break down a complex problem into its interlocking parts. For example, the student-centered routines the IFL introduced in Dallas are based on a body of research on cognitive apprenticeship, which involves making the steps in a cognitive process explicit rather than remaining implicit and unavailable to some students.

Educators engage in plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles focused on tests of change. PDSA cycles involve testing, reflecting on, and refining a change to practice, determining next steps, and beginning the process again. In Dallas, one test of change was the Task Sheet, which helped organize lessons and outlined the cognitive

work expected of students. Teachers tried them out, discussed how they were using them with colleagues, shared their students’ work, and adapted them based on their classroom experiences. PDSA cycles can help teachers build a collaborative culture of reflective practice, as well as supporting individual teachers’ learning. One important condition is that conversations about the work take place in a problem-solving space rather than an evaluative space.

Measure and document progress. Ways of measuring progress should offer a clear window on the work. For example, Dallas students’ annotations on texts gave teachers a better idea of how much they were comprehending compared to the multiple choice questions teachers had used in the past. Teachers should be involved in identifying which kinds of data would be meaningful indicators of the actual goals. Practitioners may need to find new ways of gathering and preserving data, and new definitions of outcomes, such as measures of student engagement versus the number of correct circled answers.

Scale and share learning. One of the goals of using continuous improvement methods is to reach conclusions more quickly about what works, and to share the learning across contexts. Looking at outcomes across classrooms can help practitioners identify patterns and generalize lessons learned. In Dallas, the Network coordinates cross-school meetings and events where teachers and other educators can share knowledge developed in their PLCs and in their individual classrooms. The Network also gathers data and artifacts at the classroom and school levels.

Our thanks to the teachers who shared their time and their insights.



The Institute for Learning (IFL) works to ensure that every student—especially those traditionally underserved due to income, race, and language—has access to high-level texts, tasks, and high-quality learning opportunities to build the critical thinking and deep reasoning skills that are required for success. We believe that the way to achieve equitable and sustainable change is to focus on coherent, evidence-based learning for all educators.



The Dallas Independent School District sits in the heart of a large, diverse, and dynamic region with a metropolitan population of 6.5 million people in the 12 counties in North Central Texas. The school district serves approximately 154,000 students in pre-kindergarten through the 12th grade. Approximately 70 percent of students served by Dallas ISD are Hispanic/Latino and 21 percent are Black/African American.



The Dallas ISD/IFL/CUE Network for School Improvement (NSI) is a collaboration between the Institute for Learning, the Learning Research and Development Center, and the Center for Urban Education at the University of Pittsburgh, and Dallas ISD leadership. The NSI Hub supports teams for 14 schools to use continuous improvement literacy practices as tests of change in instruction. The end goal is to improve the literacy achievement of African American, Hispanic, and emergent bi-lingual students as well as students from low-income families to be on-track for college and career readiness at the end of 9th grade. The work is occurring over five years (2018–23) with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

For more information, visit ifl.pitt.edu/network-for-school-improvement.

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