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Released Time Education in the United States

James A. Swezey and Katherine G. Schultz

Released Time Education (RTE) is general nomenclature given to a little known aspect of religious education in the United States. RTE programs afford parents the opportunity to grant their school-aged children permission to leave public school campuses during regular school hours in order to receive religious instruction. A few states even allow students to receive academic credit.¹ RTE programs are typically established by private, religiously-affiliated organizations. A variety of religious traditions are represented among these programs including Protestant, Catholic, Latter Day Saints (Mormons), Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu.² Baer and Carper argue: “A released-time model honestly accepts the fact that we are a religiously diverse society and that trying to teach religion/spirituality (or even about religion/spirituality) to all students in common classes will inevitably lead to distortion and indoctrination.”³ Released Time Bible Education (RTBE) is a specific name commonly ascribed to programs established by evangelical Christian organizations who find these programs particularly attractive because the Bible and the Gospel message can be presented from a sectarian perspective. Children in these programs are often proselytized openly.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the historical foundations and current trends in RTE programs using case study research methods. These programs have existed across the United States for 100 years. As the authors of this chapter, it is our experience that educators within public, and even religious, schools and higher education are largely ignorant of the legality and even the very existence of RTE programs. During author interviews with RTE program directors, it was reported that public school board members and administrators (e.g., principals and superintendents) are often unreceptive and even resistant when presented with

proposals for the formation of new programs due to fear of legal entanglement and ignorance. Teacher education programs, especially those at institutions with explicitly religious missions, should consider offering support to RTE program directors and educators in their regions and educate their own students, especially administrators about the legality and potential benefits of these programs.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

While RTE programs remain largely unknown to the public, and even most educators, some programs have existed continuously for several decades. For example, the Weekday Religious Education program in Staunton, Virginia has operated for approximately 70 years and a vast majority (ranges are reported between 78 and 95%) of eligible students participate.⁴ While most such programs are concentrated in the South and Midwest, they also exist along the West and East Coasts. In fact, programs have existed in New York City since the 1940s and throughout California since 1942. Dierenfield examined a national sample of school districts ($N = 830$) and discovered approximately 33% of school superintendents reported release time programs in their districts.⁵ Dierenfield also found similar studies claimed 26% of schools in 1966 and 30% in 1960 reported RTE programs.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to accurately report the number of students enrolled in RTE and RTBE programs currently, but it is clear that they represent a fairly substantial number of students. Depending upon what programs are counted, and from what religious traditions, enrollment numbers range from 250,000⁶ to 600,000.⁷ The most widely publicized claims regarding evangelical RTBE enrollment are that there are over 1,000 programs serving 250,000 students across the United States.

These numbers are difficult to authenticate since there is no government agency or private body accurately tracking them. Their appearance may be an example of people and organizations parroting the numbers that have been bantered around for decades. For example, Released Time Education© claims, “Currently, it is estimated that there are over 1,000 Released Time Programs in operation today involving over 250,000 students in kindergarten through high school.”⁸ Interestingly, in 2003 Mark Redka, elementary director of Children’s Bible Ministries of southwestern Pennsylvania similarly reported: “At least 1,000 RTBE programs are in operation, educating more than 250,000 public school students in 30 states.”⁹ These ubiquitous numbers are also reported by dozens of online sources (e.g., Palmetto Family Council, Midlands Christian Learning Center, Dekalb County Released Time Bible Education), including Wikipedia.¹⁰

RTE Early History

The original idea of released time religious education in the United States was first publically discussed in 1905 at a school conference in New York City. Although existing records provide different accounts as to who made the initial suggestion, someone proposed that public elementary schools should be closed one day a week in addition to Sunday so that children could receive religious instruction.¹¹ While the earliest RTE program is credited to the Church of Jesus of Latter-day Saints in 1912,¹² the concept of RTBE among Christians and Jews was operationalized in 1914 under the leadership of Dr. William Wirt (1874-1938), superintendent of public schools in Gary, Indiana¹³ when “seven churches and two synagogues took advantage of his offer.”¹⁴

Wirt is most widely known for developing the Gary Plan, named for the local municipality, which sought to reduce inefficiency in the use of school resources by dividing students into platoons. One platoon would use the classroom facilities while the other would work in shops, the gymnasiums, or outdoor facilities. Wirt believed that public school students did not receive enough moral and religious instruction so he invited local clergy to provide instruction within the school to 619 children whose parents granted permission.¹⁵ “Dr. Wirt believed that the church, home, playground, library, and school were all components in a child’s education.”¹⁶ Ironically, although currently viewed as an extension of religious conservatism, the program was introduced by Wirt as a progressive reform.¹⁷ It was an expression of a growing desire among Protestant Christians to reach young people attending local public schools.

RTE Expansion

The ensuing decades after its inception saw a proliferation of RTE programs. In 1922 RTE programs were active in 23 states, serving 40,000 students from 200 school districts.¹⁸ For instance, Newton, Kansas established an RTBE program in 1924 for second through sixth grade students in which 65% percent of district students participated.¹⁹ By 1946 program attendance reached 97% of students, and remained at 95% in the 1960s, but dropped to only 15% by 2003.²⁰ Supreme Court findings reported, “According to responsible figures almost 2,000,000 in some 2,200 communities participated in ‘released time’ programs during 1947.”²¹ Released Time Education© reported:

By 1932, thirty States had active Released Time Programs in 400 communities with enrollment of 250,000 students. Ten years later, in 1942 participation reached 1.5 million students in 46 States. Released Time peaked in 1947 with 2 million students enrolled in

2,200 communities. During this time, favorable Released Time legislation was adopted by 12 States.²²

In a thesis research project, Bodden²³ cited surveys sent by the Research Division of the National Education Association in 1948-1949 regarding RTE programs to 5,100 superintendents across the nation. Responses were received from 2,637 school systems, of which 708 reported some sort of program in place.²⁴ Bodden reported an estimated 2,000,000 students attended these programs.²⁵

RTE and the LDS Church

For 100 years the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), commonly known as Mormons, have operated a network of RTE programs, called seminaries, through the auspices of the Church Education System (CES). Like many religious communities, the LDS Church is committed to the religious education of its youth. This commitment dates back to its founder, Joseph Smith, in 1832.²⁶

During its early years, LDS communities established and operated their own religious academies for their children, but with the growth of free public school systems, these academies dwindled in number. By 1890, most schools in LDS communities were state-run and eliminated religious instruction.²⁷ The LDS Church began its first RTE program in 1912, “erecting a small building across from Granite High School in South Salt Lake City, and established it as the first LDS seminary. Thomas J. Yates became the first seminary teacher and he instructed some seventy students that first year.”²⁸ A century later, LDS records report 122,782 students worldwide enrolled in released-time seminaries.²⁹ According to Johnson,

A seminary is used to teach high-schooled-aged youth (ages 14-18) in religious doctrines and principles as espoused by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A seminary is typically located in a private building adjacent to the public high school or

junior high school and is administered by a seminary principal, a support specialist (secretary), and a faculty of teachers sufficient to accommodate the size of the student enrollment.³⁰

The LDS Church offers three different types of seminary programs.³¹ They include released-time seminary, daily seminary, and home-study seminary. Some of these programs meet before or after school, while others are truly released time programs as students leave a public school campus during regular school hours. “Released-time seminary ... classes are taught by full-time teachers and are generally held in Church-owned seminary buildings adjacent to public schools.”³²

The purpose of the seminary “is to help youth and young adults understand and rely on the teachings and Atonement of Jesus Christ, qualify for the blessings of the temple, and prepare themselves, their families, and others for eternal life with their Father in Heaven.”³³ Seminaries are run by principals who “are selected from among the core of employees that work anywhere within the CES worldwide. There are approximately 3,443 employees in the CES with 288 of those employees assigned as a principal over a seminary.”³⁴ Many principals also maintain teaching responsibilities within the programs, although at a reduced load.³⁵ While there is no additional formal training for principals,³⁶ teachers have received training and evaluations for decades.³⁷ Typically, LDS seminary buildings are within close walking distance of public high schools, sometimes directly adjacent. LDS students are then able to take one class period off from the public school as released time.

An argument can be made that no religious sect seems to offer a more uniform and centralized program than the LDS Church. They are aided in their quest for quality by the singular control exercised over the programs and curriculum by church authorities headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Jewish RTE

Among the most prominent supporters of RTE is the Released Time Program of Greater New York (RTPGNY). Since its founding 1941 by the National Committee for Furtherance of Jewish Education, classes have been held in local synagogues where instructors have taught more than 250,000 students about the Torah, prayers, holidays, history, and customs of the Jewish faith (RTPGNY, 2012).

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, before the proliferation of Jewish day schools, many Jewish children went to public schools. Released time programs spread after the New York state legislature enacted a law permitting students to be excused from class for an hour a week for the purpose of religious education. This time became known among Jewish adherents as the “Wednesday Hour” since they were released from class on that day of the week. Despite regular opposition, these programs continue:

This year [2011-2012 school year] the program services more than 125 sites in the New York City area. Throughout the year more than 200 dedicated young teachers have gone to the sites each week to create a warm atmosphere of religion and acceptance for more than 900 students. (RTPGNY, 2012)

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Many politically conservative-leaning Christian organizations (e.g., Focus on the Family, Family Research Council, etc.) lament what they decry as the removal of God from the public square, especially the public school. They perceive liberal and secular forces as hostile toward religion in general, but especially Christianity when it makes claims of objective truth and salvation through Christ alone. Baer and Carper wrote, “Rather than being exemplary in its tolerance of competing worldviews, liberalism, in effect, claims it is the true religion, the only

religion appropriate for our common, public, political life.”³⁸ Baer and Carper employed sarcasm when attempting to capture this liberal perspective:

Practice your religion at home and at church, but remember it has no place in the public square. Stay in your private religious ghetto, sit in the back of the bus, and behave yourself, and everything will be just fine. And, in any case, why would civilized people want to fight over the truth claims of religion—over one’s personal beliefs and values? That’s about as rational as seriously disputing the merits of different flavors of ice cream!³⁹

Christian conservatives point to Supreme Court decisions such as *Engel v. Vitale*,⁴⁰ which declared unconstitutional the recitation of a prescribed prayer and *Abingdon v. Schempp*,⁴¹ which declared unconstitutional a school district’s requirement that students read ten verses from the Bible and recite the Lord’s Prayer. The controversial decisions merely culminated a long process of secularization of public education.⁴² They also cite high rates of drug and alcohol abuse, crime, teen pregnancy, etc. as resulting evidence that America has lost its spiritual moorings. According to RTBE advocate, Flowers:

If you honestly ask yourself why kids are killing kids in the hall ways and class rooms of our public schools, or why there is no respect for authority whether it be in school, on the job or at home by many children and teens: if we answer those questions honestly, we will find at the root of it is an ever increasing hostility towards God, and Christianity as a whole. . . . We are reaping today what has been sewn over the past 40 to 50 years in this country.⁴³

Among advocates for RTBE programs, the proposed solutions to these maladies is the establishment of released time programs which will restore the practice of Bible study and worship of God among American public school students. Flowers claims that these programs, while not a panacea,

will (if done properly) promote respect for authority (parents, teachers, principals, bosses etc.), human life and friends and family. It will educate students about the Bible; it’s [sic] teachings, and our Savior Jesus Christ. It will instill godly values, behaviors, and ethics as taught in god’s word. Ultimately a Release Time program will help in redirecting the corrupt moral compass of our nations [sic] youth.⁴⁴

Similar sentiments are expressed by John Atkinson, president of the Fellowship of Christian

Released Time Ministries:

From the arrival of the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock and on into the first century of our nation's history there was a common conviction that the spiritual training and education of our children was essential in every respect: it would invite God's blessing upon the United States, it would insure that children would master the elements of a good academic education, and it would promote a spirit of gratitude to God for our prosperity, preservation and protection. Furthermore it would facilitate order, discipline and respect for authority. ... How could a child in a public school ever hear and be taught such things during the public school day? Answer: Through a Released Time Education program!⁴⁵

Many evangelical organizations have been established to support RTBE programs.

Among the leaders in this field are Children's Bible Ministries and School Ministries.

Children's Bible Ministries began in 1934 when Walter Jensen entered public schools in Florida

"to teach God's Word, motivating children to memorize Scripture by offering as an incentive the

opportunity to attend bible camp."⁴⁶ Over the course of time, Children's Bible Ministries

expanded its outreach to several states including Alabama, North Carolina, Tennessee,

Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. School Ministries was founded in 1995 by S. Grayson

Hartgrove in South Carolina. He also established a number of released time programs.⁴⁷ School

Ministries is a nonprofit organization "dedicated to promoting and supporting church and

community efforts across America in offering Bible education programs during school hours."⁴⁸

Its mission is "to partner with communities across America in bringing hope and transformed

lives to youth through school-based Bible education."⁴⁹

OPPOSITION TO RTE

Opponents of released time programs raise legitimate legal, philosophical, and practical concerns about released time programs. Opponents range from secular humanists, who oppose

any and all public ties to religion to the profoundly religious who believe that public entanglement is a threat to religious liberty.

The legal concerns are clearly outlined in the numerous court cases. Philosophical and practical concerns include the numerous, sometimes unintended consequences such programs manifest. Even before released time was conceived in 1905, religion within the emerging public school systems was a source of contention. According to Dewey, religion “can be taught only by segregating pupils and turning them over at special hours to separate representatives of rival faiths.”⁵⁰

Lithwick⁵¹ posited several criticisms of the Staunton, Virginia, Weekday Religious Education program that are broadly disseminated among RTE opponents. She reported that 1) students who did not attend classes were ostracized, 2) classes subtract from classroom time, making education mandated by federal programs such as the No Child Left Behind more difficult, 3) that programs such as these discriminate against those who are not Christians, and 4) that programs promote an evangelical, denominational, or sectarian viewpoint.

Lithwick’s concerns are legitimate and need to be addressed. Regarding ostracization and discrimination, where released time programs are highly popular and a large majority of students participate, the potential negative ramifications for those who do not is real. Ideally, students who are receiving religious instruction would demonstrate the virtues of faith by loving their neighbors as themselves.⁵² But the ultimate responsibility to address this problem rests with school officials who must protect the rights of all students. Lithwick’s concern regarding the academic impact of diminished classroom time is a subject of much-needed recent research.

A thorough search for scholarly research revealed only three studies related to the measurable benefits of participation. The first two⁵³ examined the relationship between released time and academic outcomes. Findings in both studies showed participation in release time was not associated with lower academic test scores across a variety of measures. Another widely touted study among supporters of RTE is the program evaluation of an Oakland, California RTE program by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency.⁵⁴ In their executive summary, Morris, Krisberg, and Dhanoa found that Oakland RTE students performed better than their non-attending counterparts in almost every category of literacy skills measured. They also reported strong socialization outcomes such as mentorship, bonding, and the reinforcement of positive moral and character development.

Item #4 reflects the decades old debate about religious instruction for public school students: should it be broadly ecumenical or sectarian? The answer people support is typically reflective of their worldview. Broadly ecumenical organizations (e.g., Unitarians, National Council of Churches, Interfaith Alliance, etc.) will likely support an approach that reflects their values, while sectarian organizations (e.g., National Association of Evangelicals, Southern Baptist Association, etc.) will support a one that reflects their own.

But opposition such as this is nothing new. In the 1940s some leaders within the Orthodox branch of Judaism objected to the RTE program in the Greater New York area, claiming that parents would replace proper Talmudic training with the Wednesday Hour. Many of the ensuing court cases were brought by religious groups. For instance, Leo Pfeffer, assistant director of the Commission on Law and Social Action of the American Jewish Congress, wrote, “The dangers and disadvantages of the released-time program for religious education outweigh by far the benefits which may be derived from it.”⁵⁵ Pfeffer,⁵⁶ who would go on to serve as one

of three appellant lawyers in *Zorach v. Clauson*,⁵⁷ wrote a pamphlet entitled *Religion and the Public Schools*. In it he surmised four chief dangers in released time: (1) it introduces religious differences within the public schools and is therefore divisive and is a threat to separation of Church and State; (2) it exerts unfair pressure on students to enroll in religious classes; (3) Jewish children are tempted to attend Christian classes to avoid disclosing their Jewish faith; (4) the religious instruction is often accepted as a satisfactory substitute for real religious instruction even though the amount imparted under released time is negligible.

They were aided by such groups as the Public Education Association (PEA), which argued that released time programs violated the first and fourteenth amendments of the US Constitution based on the then-recent *McCullum* ruling by the US Supreme Court.⁵⁸ They cited the government's compulsory attendance laws as creating the conflict. The PEA also claimed that loose enforcement of procedures led to truancy among "'laggards' who played in the yard or in the streets for 'fifteen or thirty minutes' before leaving for the religious center."⁵⁹

Around the same time period Binder concurred in part when he wrote, "In the public school they [students] are all Americans and sing the national anthem and other patriotic songs with equal fervor. ... When the hour for released-time comes a division arises."⁶⁰ His second argument definitely reflected the times in which he lived:

A greater though less obvious danger of released-time lies in the increasing dependence of Americans on the government, both local and federal. Fifty years ago we read about socialism and communism. ... What we read about as an aberrant product of downtrodden European peoples, now stares us in the face. What lies behind these isms? It is surrender of the individual to the state; not only the willingness but the demand that somebody else should do for me what I ought to do for myself. It is the abdication of liberty. ... Its essential meaning is the shifting of individual responsibility to the community; an indication of the weakening of the American spirit for independence. Religion is a matter of the church and the home. When these two organizations fail in the instruction of the young, they surrender a precious privilege to the community.⁶¹

Program quality was a continual source of friction and debate among both advocates and opponents of RTE programs. In 1956 the Episcopal Diocese of New York released a policy statement calling for four standards for released time programs: (1) careful administration of the program, “good transportation arrangements and the best possible physical surroundings”; (2) “Carefully chosen and well-trained teachers”; (3) a “sound, planned curriculum”; and (4) clear goal statements.⁶²

Vinson, identified several advantages gained through RTE programs.⁶³ Among those advantages is that it is inclusive of any religious group that is capable of developing and administering a program and is also able to convince the local school district of a need for and potential benefits of such a program. This benefit is testified to by the diversity of groups already taking advantage of this opportunity. Another benefit is that schools are provided with the “opportunity to respect the religious liberty of parents in supplementing their child’s education during the normative school day, as well as that of acknowledging and respecting the role of religious faith in the lives of its students.”⁶⁴ RTE programs are permitted to be faith-driven, devotional, and even dogmatic on matters of sectarian beliefs. Finally, RTE provides an invaluable service for families desiring religious instruction but who are not connected to a local religious community (e.g., church, synagogue, or mosque).

Vinson also noted, “One of the major disadvantages of released time is that it is at high risk for abuse. As was noted above, it is illegal for a school and/or its faculty to promote, endorse, or favor released-time programs.”⁶⁵ He argued that these abuses occur far too frequently. He advocated for third-party organizations that will ensure program alignment with applicable laws and regulations.

Organizations like School Ministries are hoping to fill just such a role on behalf of RTBE programs. School Ministries is currently working to develop accreditation criteria against which programs can be assessed for quality. This might achieve the level of uniformity of quality among programs sought by Vinson and others. While the devotional nature of RTE programs can be an advantage, Vinson points out this can also be a clear disadvantage: “The potential for teachers to express dogmatic and unaccommodating positions toward delicate and debatable issues (e.g., divorce, homosexuality, abortion, etc.), when such issues arise, is great.”⁶⁶ He was concerned that unbridled dogmatism could potentially be at odds with the values of the broader student body and lead to division.

SUMMARY

Despite their presence across the country, RTE programs remain one of America’s best kept secrets in the field of religious education. This is especially surprising among conservative Christian churches and communities that might otherwise be among the programs’ staunchest supporters considering their growing concerns that they are losing up to 70% of young people by age 23 as measured by church attendance.⁶⁷ The Barna Group affirms this growing angst when it reports that “the faith journeys of teens and young adults are often challenging for many parents and faith leaders, who often misunderstand how and why young people become disconnected.”⁶⁸ They cite study findings that report that “84% of Christian 18- to 29-year-olds admit that they have no idea how the Bible applies to their... professional interests.”⁶⁹

For those who oppose the openly evangelistic mission of RTE programs, it is important to understand the theological foundation Christian supporters of RTE programs cite as motivation for their zeal. The Great Commission presents Jesus’ final words to His disciples before His ascension:

Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’⁷⁰

The imperative verb in the original Greek language is “make disciples” and many Christians believe that it is incumbent upon them as a religious duty to work towards the goal of reaching all young people with the teachings of the Bible.

The varied RTE programs across America have widely divergent theological foundations stemming from the various sectarian organizations that sponsor them. This rightly reflects the religious pluralism embodied in United States. Nevertheless, these organizations share a common goal to promote within the young people who choose to attend a deeper understanding of and participation in the religious views and practices espoused by the program sponsors, thus serving to better reflect and reinforce the cultural diversity that exists in today’s public schools.

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¹³ R. A. Baer Jr. & J. C. Carper, "To the Advantage of Infidelity."

¹⁴ J. Vinson, "Religion in the Public Schools," 237.

¹⁵ R. J. Lamar, "Newton, Kansas: A Case Study in Religious Released Time Education" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 2006), Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database, UMI No. 3187655.

¹⁶ "History," *School Ministries*, 2011, http://www.releasedtime.org/sitert/besthtml/best_history.htm.

¹⁷ R. A. Baer Jr. & J. C. Carper, "To the Advantage of Infidelity."

¹⁸ "Released time history," *Released Time Education*.

¹⁹ R. J. Lamar, "Newton, Kansas."

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *McCullum v. Board of Education of School District No. 71, Champaign County*, 333 US 203 (Supreme Court, 1948), ¶ 225.

²² "Released time history," *Released Time Education*.

²³ R. V. Bodden, "Released Time" (Master's thesis, New Jersey State Teachers College, Newark, New Jersey, 1953), Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database, UMI No. EP11137.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁶ M. W. Strader, "Ideal Teaching."

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 15.

²⁹ "Church Educational System Annual Information Update 2006," *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2006), 2.

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³¹ "Church Educational System Annual Information Update 2006," *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*.

³² Ibid., 1.

³³ "The Objective of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion," *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2011, <http://seminary.lds.org/purpose/>.

³⁴ E. W. Johnson, *A Qualitative Study of Seminary Principals*, 30.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ M. W. Strader, "Ideal Teaching."

³⁸ R. A. Baer Jr. & J. C. Carper, "To the Advantage of Infidelity," 602.

³⁹ Ibid., 602.

⁴⁰ Engel et al. v. Vitale et al., 370 US 421 (Supreme Court, 1962).

⁴¹ Abingdon School District v. Schempp, 374 US 203 (Supreme Court, 1963).

⁴² J. C. Carper, "History, religion, and schooling: A context for conversation," in *Curriculum, Religion, and Public Education: Conversations for an Enlarging Public Square*, eds. J. T. Sears & J. C. Carper (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1998).

⁴³ D. A. Flowers, "Why is a Program like Release Time Needed Today?" *Public School Bible Outreach Ministries*, <http://www.psci.net/bibleinschool/Thisispagetwo.htm>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ J. Atkinson, "Released Time Education: The Key to Reaching Kids in our Public Schools," 2012, <http://www.rtce.org/pages.asp?pageid=36516>.

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