



# Decision-Making amid Uncertainty: District Responses to COVID and Systemic Racism

**Understanding how to deliver high-quality teaching and learning at scale — particularly for the most vulnerable students — remains vital**

**About This Document:** This paper summarizes findings from interviews conducted with 17 experts about school districts and charter networks that made a relatively successful pivot to remote teaching and learning in spring 2020, particularly for low-income students and students of color. Interviewees were asked to identify the core capacities that enabled a smooth transition to help surface lessons for states, districts, and schools. Working to collect more detailed and consistent data across multiple sites will be important moving forward. Understanding how to deliver high-quality teaching and learning at scale — particularly for the most vulnerable students — remains vital. Carnegie Corporation of New York is committed to sharing what its grantees are learning with the field to contribute to that conversation.

**A Vision Paper From**



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The shuttering of school buildings this spring because of COVID-19 and the national reckoning with systemic racism following the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd presented school systems with an unprecedented challenge: How to educate students amid continued uncertainty and unrest?

This paper, supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York, summarizes findings from interviews conducted with 17 experts about school districts and charter networks that made a relatively successful pivot to remote teaching and learning this past spring, particularly for low-income students and students of color. Interviewees were asked to identify the core capacities that enabled a smooth transition to help surface lessons for states, districts, and schools. Carnegie Corporation of New York was particularly interested in whether districts that had aligned people, resources, and practices around a clear instructional vision were better able to pivot.

Few empirical attempts have been made to identify school systems that made a smooth transition to remote learning in the 2019–20 school year. The best source of data is a spring survey of 477 school systems' responses to the COVID-19 crisis by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), which has been periodically updated. Results released in June showed that just 33 percent of districts expected teachers to provide remote instruction, 27 percent required schools to track student attendance, and 37 percent required teachers to check in one-on-one with students on a regular basis.<sup>1</sup>

Given the lack of data, the bar for successfully transitioning to remote instruction last spring was relatively low. Interviewees defined success largely in opposition to the vast majority of districts, which were deemed lagging. The key characteristics most often identified were a rapid shift to remote learning; near-universal access to computing devices and broadband internet; high levels of student attendance online; and strong measures of student, teacher, and parent satisfaction, where available. Little empirical information is available on access to and engagement in rigorous instruction. Even among systems that made a more successful pivot to distance learning, significant barriers to providing rigorous online instruction remain, particularly in serving English language learners and students with disabilities.

Any consideration of district responses also has to acknowledge the federal and state contexts in which districts operate. Unclear and conflicting federal and state guidance and uncertainty about future revenue forced many district leaders to navigate everything from family food insecurity and technology gaps to decisions about when and how to reopen schools largely on their own. Reviews of state school reopening plans by Education First and CRPE revealed that most state plans focused heavily on operations and health guidance, not instruction. Only a few states — including Delaware, Louisiana, Rhode Island, and Tennessee — had a clear theory of action regarding the state's role in teaching and learning and provided districts with detailed guidance.

“Because so much of the conversation has been about logistics, there hasn't been attention to teaching and learning and how we might set up the year to continuously improve,” said one expert, “yet this is going to be a long road ahead of us.”

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<sup>1</sup> Betheny Gross and Alicia Opalka, *Too Many Schools Leave Learning to Chance During the Pandemic* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 2020).

# Factors Identified as Supporting a Successful Transition

## 1. Prior Experience with Technology

Those interviewed identified a school system's prior experience with technology — and, therefore, its ability to provide widespread access to devices and broadband internet to students and teachers — as necessary but not sufficient to enable a smooth transition to remote instruction this past spring.

“Honestly, if you didn't have devices that kids could take home, you were dead in the water,” said one expert. Broward County Public Schools in Florida, for example, moved quickly to pull 85,000 devices out of classrooms and carts and check them out to students. Among districts and charter networks that responded quickly to the crisis, CRPE identified having a technology infrastructure already in place as a key factor. Miami-Dade County Public Schools had distance-learning technology and crisis planning related to natural disasters in place when COVID hit. The district signed an emergency work agreement with its teacher union allowing remote instruction to proceed; published an Instructional Continuity Plan that set clear expectations regarding curriculum to be used, teacher roles and supports, and services for families; and prepared for closures by surveying families to identify their technology needs and preferred communication methods.<sup>2</sup>

In September, Bellwether Education Partners and Teach for America published *Promise in the Time of Quarantine: Exploring Schools' Responses to COVID-19*, which highlighted the experiences of 12 schools that made a relatively successful transition to remote instruction.<sup>3</sup> They found that schools that were previously using online platforms or programs were at an advantage, as were schools that were able to get devices to students quickly. One expert said that in schools where teachers, students, and parents were already familiar with digital tools and viewed them as part of learning, the transition to fully online learning was “less of a three-alarm fire,” even though it was disruptive. Systems that had prioritized online learning before COVID, noted another expert, went into the pandemic with decisions already made about which platforms to use, how to distribute devices, and how to prepare teachers. Students and families in those systems also had a certain level of familiarity with online learning. Some other systems, in contrast, hit pause on providing instruction to students last spring because of concerns that not all students had equitable access to technology.

A counterexample is District of Columbia Public Schools, which did not have a strong technology infrastructure going into the pandemic but quickly mobilized teams to ensure that paper copies of resources were available to families across grades and created an open-source website to publish lesson plans. DCPS also made 30-minute lessons featuring some of its most effective teachers available on YouTube and collaborated with local television stations to distribute them, which was particularly helpful for families without access to personal computers or the internet.

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<sup>2</sup> Robin Lake, Bree Dusseault, and Travis Pillow, “Analysis: What Can We Learn from Districts That Responded Early to the Coronavirus Pandemics? Here Are 5 Takeaways,” *The 74*, May 9, 2020, <https://www.the74million.org/article/analysis-what-can-we-learn-from-districts-that-responded-early-to-the-coronavirus-pandemics-here-are-5-takeaways/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ashley LiBetti, Lynne Graziano, and Jennifer O'Neil Schiess, *Promise in the Time of Quarantine: Exploring Schools' Responses to COVID-19* (Washington, D.C.: Bellwether Education Partners, 2020), <https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/PromiseInQuarantineBellwetherFinal.pdf>.

## 2. A Clear Vision

At the most basic level, a coherent system has a clear vision for teaching and learning and has structures, resources, and ways of working that support that vision. These include not only aligned systems of instruction and professional learning but also operational capabilities, such as finance and human resources departments that can support what needs to happen in teaching and learning. Several organizations have developed frameworks for building strong systems, including the Learning Accelerator<sup>4</sup> and the Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University.<sup>5</sup>

Lindsay Unified School District in California has been a leader in student-centered instruction for more than a decade and has worked to maximize the use of technology to ensure that learning is available anytime, anywhere. The district was able to move students and teachers to remote learning quickly because of its well-aligned systems, with younger students especially feeling safe, cared for, and supported. Even so, a case study by the Learning Accelerator described challenges in sustaining students' energy and enthusiasm over time; ensuring teachers' familiarity with different tools and apps; providing robust support structures at the high school level, where educators had more concerns about students' social-emotional well-being; and overcoming inadequate home support across content areas.<sup>6</sup>

District of Columbia Public Schools similarly had a strong vision of instructional coherence. In the first week of March, even before schools closed, its leaders pulled together all cluster-based content staff in schools to prioritize grade-level expectations for the year. "You need to mobilize your people resources to support coherence," said one expert. "They had the courage to say, 'What you think is important right now, we have to quickly tell you is less important.'"

## 3. Strong Leadership

Having strong, decisive, and resilient leaders who can speak with moral authority and execute an equitable vision for teaching and learning is key, a number of experts said. For many school system leaders, responding to racialized violence and civic unrest has proven as important as responding to the pandemic.

The Phoenix Union High School District in Arizona, most of whose 30,000 students live below the federal poverty line and are young people of color, was already working to create a portfolio of schools to address the aspirations of its diverse student body prior to COVID. When buildings closed on March 6, Superintendent Chad Gestson pledged to keep students healthy and connected by having virtually every adult in the system — including the superintendent and the governing board — responsible for calling a group of students every day to make sure they were well.<sup>7</sup> In July, in response to police violence against people of color, Gestson announced that the district would not renew its contract with the police to provide school resource officers in school buildings but instead would use the \$1.2 million in annual savings to launch a participatory budgeting process, with students, families, and educators proposing uses for district funds. The willingness and confidence of leaders like Gestson to engage in uncomfortable conversations about

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<sup>4</sup> Niithi Thomas and Beth Rabbitt, *Innovative Learning Implementation Framework: A Guide to Shifting System Conditions for Success and Scale* (Princeton, NJ: The Learning Accelerator, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> "Coherence Framework," Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://pelp.fas.harvard.edu/coherence-framework>.

<sup>6</sup> Beth Holland, Beth Rabbitt, Ling Zhang, and others, *Perceptions of Learner Behaviors and Actions During Personalized, Remote Learning: An Analysis of the Instructional Look Fors in LUSD* (n.p.: The Learning Accelerator, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Marc Porter Magee, "Interview with Dr. Chad Gestson," *50Can Blog*, April 10, 2020, <https://50can.org/blog/distance-learning-with-chad-gestson-superintendent-of-phoenix-union-high-school-district/>.

race and socioeconomic privilege with educators and the community has been essential in grappling with issues of equity, noted one expert.

More than anything, effective leaders have exhibited adaptive leadership. They were able to step back and ask whether their initial vision was fit for purpose under remote instruction. They then brought together a leadership team that was clear about the values they wanted to emphasize in the moment. These leaders were able to challenge existing assumptions rather than trying to replicate traditional forms of instruction online.

“Coherence is helpful if it actually aligns really well with what is demanded of the situation,” observed an expert. “It’s not helpful if all you can do is behave in exactly the same way in a new situation, but it can be helpful if it’s a mechanism to help organizations shift practice toward something that’s already been started.”

Another expert voiced a similar perspective: “It really came down to the leader’s aptitude for adaptive change and change management,” which tended to favor people with prior entrepreneurial experience. “Making uncharted-territory decisions is not something that educators are practiced at, which is why I think the leaders who had to do that in other contexts ended up succeeding better at this moment.”

“Leadership had to be bold and decisive,” said another. “This wasn’t a time to sit on your hands and hem and haw. This was a time to do something.” In the places that moved fast, it was all about leadership.

#### 4. Clarity around Decision-Making, Communications, and Curricula

Decision-making authority, communications, and curricula were three areas where experts identified coherence as important. Many charter management organizations and independent schools, experts said, were able to make system-wide decisions about products, platforms, apps, and curricula to support remote instruction. Meanwhile, large urban systems, such as Boston Public Schools, lacked prior agreements about what was a school versus a system-level prerogative, which increased fragmentation.

The key question, experts said, is not about centralization versus decentralization. Rather, clarity is needed on what does and does not need to be centralized to create coherence and how to solve problems as close to the ground as possible in ways that empower teachers and families.

The nonprofit Education Resource Strategies has worked with many districts to push decision-making authority down to the school level, but it has also observed that when districts did not simultaneously build strong communications and planning support between schools and systems, they were unable to react quickly when the pandemic hit. Similarly, CRPE observed, “Districts with clear decision-making protocols and strong internal communications plans could roll out decisions to staff and families faster than those that needed to put these structures in place.”<sup>8</sup>

Having a clear approach to teaching and learning appeared particularly beneficial. CRPE found that charter networks such as Achievement First, Uncommon Schools, and Success Academies were able to establish cohesive learning programs and even share their resources online, in part because they had already established a clear approach to curriculum and instruction across their schools.

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<sup>8</sup> Lake et al., *Analysis: What Can We Learn from Districts That Responded Early to the Coronavirus Pandemics? Here Are 5 Takeaways*.

“The districts or systems that have a centralized curriculum are much further ahead,” said another expert. For example, Success Academies quickly decided to have its best teachers provide video lessons for all 4th-grade math classes, which freed up other teachers to work with small groups of students. Baltimore City Public Schools worked with Great Minds to identify existing videos that teachers could use in asynchronous lessons, which enabled professional learning to focus on improving the synchronous parts of instruction, such as guided practice, checking for understanding, and looking at student work. During the summer, the school system focused professional learning for teachers on modeling Eureka lessons on Zoom, whereas in districts where teachers were using multiple curricula, the guidance was more generic and abstract. States such as Louisiana and districts such as Baltimore that had allocated resources for teacher professional development, particularly around the use of high-quality instructional materials, were more ready to support teachers when the pandemic hit.

Successful districts were problem solvers and effective crisis managers. They adopted new ways of working with urgency and intentionality and were able to identify and act on their highest priorities. What enabled their effectiveness was not just a mindset. These school systems were clear about the roles, decisions, processes, and routines used to solve problems, shift resources and practices, and examine whether changes were working. Districts that had structures to support these activities did well. Systems such as Broward County Public Schools also engaged in scenario planning, in contrast with districts that moved too late to shift from one mode of instruction to another in preparing for the fall.

## 5. Trusting and Collaborative School Cultures

Experts also hypothesized that systems that had built team-oriented, trusting relationships between teachers and administrators, and that encouraged teachers to take risks, were better positioned to address the challenges posed by COVID.

“If you’re operating in a low-trust environment, like most of our systems are, it’s very hard to achieve coherence,” said one expert. “When you have trust, people are more willing to see their work as part of a whole.” Bellwether Education Partners found an all-hands-on-deck response among schools that made a successful pivot, with bus drivers delivering meals and instructional packets and counselors and school administrators taking on responsibility for pods of students, for example. In these schools, students were the responsibility of every staff member, and leaders were flexible and creative in finding ways to serve their population best.

The Silicon Schools Fund in California has helped launch or transform over 50 schools across Northern California, many in high-needs communities. It surveyed its schools using many of the same questions CRPE used and found they had made a much more successful transition to remote learning last spring than schools in CRPE’s survey, with 85 percent taking attendance, 100 percent providing online instruction, and 96 percent providing meaningful feedback to students.

Brian Greenberg, CEO of the Silicon Schools Fund, found that two factors predicted how well schools responded to the COVID crisis: experience using technology and the functionality and flexibility of school culture. “The schools that are succeeding,” he wrote, “are generally experienced with technology and have flexible, team-oriented cultures.... It is far easier to get better at tech than it is to solve the problem of low-capacity culture. Learning a new way to deliver school is essentially not possible if teams don’t already know how to work together effectively.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Greenberg, “What We’ve Learned from Distance Learning, and What It Means for the Future,” *Education Next*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.educationnext.org/what-weve-learned-from-distance-learning-what-it-means-for-future-improving-online-education/>.

Experts hypothesized that schools with a strong team structure and districts that encourage cohorts and networking among principals and schools were better able to make the transition to remote learning. These structures for collaboration enable educators to share their work, engage in joint problem-solving, and promote consistency across sites. In some school districts, instructional coaches have provided this connective tissue by sharing central office resources and guidance across schools.

A study released in October by CRPE found that small districts and charter networks benefited from closer and more informal connections between system leaders, school leaders, and teachers. Relationships with teacher unions in these settings were less formal and oppositional, making it easier to reach provisional agreements about teacher roles or avoid regulating them altogether.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, large urban districts, such as Los Angeles and New York City, have had to negotiate often-contentious labor-management agreements.

## 6. Strong Relationships with Students and Families

Systems that focused on supporting students' social-emotional well-being and developing strong, trusting relationships between adults and students also appeared better able to transition to remote learning in response to COVID. These districts and charter networks were able to carry a sense of student belonging, connectedness, and safety into the digital environment.

Bellwether Education Partners found that schools that had been offering strong cohort experiences, such as Big Picture Learning, were better able to migrate those relationships online. Similarly, schools that already had a teacher or other staff member who regularly coached or mentored small groups of students were better able to keep track of family and student needs, such as internet access, and respond quickly.<sup>11</sup> Phoenix Union High School District stressed the importance of formally connecting every student to at least one trusted adult in the system.

Several experts also identified student agency as critical. “We’re hearing from people time and again that schools that already had a strong focus on student agency were able to transition better because students were prepared to take the reins,” said one expert. “That’s a critical resource for schools to do what they do more effectively.”

School systems that already had good home–school communications and valued parents as assets also were better positioned going into the pandemic, experts observed. Such districts were able to set up office hours and technology help desks and use videos, text messaging, email, websites, and learning management systems to provide clear, consistent communications to students and their families. CRPE found that districts that were already using apps to communicate with students and families were able to roll out remote learning plans more easily.<sup>12</sup> One strategy that leaders used, one expert noted, was to fill the vacuum in federal and state guidance with positive statements to their community and staff to let them know they could succeed despite changing conditions.

This past summer, the Achievement Network, or ANet, worked with several states to deliver workshops to more than 50 school districts to help them plan for academic recovery. One major pain point for districts

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Hill, *Lessons from Remote Learning in Six School Systems* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> LiBetti et al., *Promise in the Time of Quarantine: Exploring Schools' Responses to COVID-19*.

<sup>12</sup> Lake et al., *Analysis: What Can We Learn from Districts That Responded Early to the Coronavirus Pandemics? Here Are 5 Takeaways*.

was the quality and directionality of their communications with parents regarding issues of instruction. ANet emphasizes the need for “equitable feedback channels” that go beyond one-way communications about health and operational issues and honor parents as partners in students’ development.

Because the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on health, economic well-being, and education in communities of color, experts also highlighted the importance of connecting with social service agencies and community-based organizations to address families’ and students’ needs. Making these connections can enable schools to focus on teaching and learning. Such vehicles include Children’s Cabinets, which coordinate work across agencies inside and outside of government, and community schools, which partner with outside agencies to offer social, health, and academic support to students and families. An Aspen Institute webinar focused on cross-agency, community-wide solutions to the education challenges posed by COVID stressed the human dimensions of systemic change and the need to break down silos that maintain the status quo. Panelists identified three approaches associated with coherence: organizing action based on a cross-division, cross-agency vision of success; authentically engaging all people involved; and breaking down silos in data-sharing to spark and support collaboration.<sup>13</sup> The notion of schools as community hubs, several experts noted, could support this vision.

Bellwether Education Partners’ school case studies showed that community support and involvement boosted schools’ ability to serve students and their families. Similarly, a study of six school systems by CRPE indicated that entities with strong preexisting connections to social service agencies were particularly effective in addressing families’ needs. “Still,” the report noted, “district and [charter management organization] leaders were concerned about trauma students had experienced (due to the pandemic, job losses, illness and death in families, and broader social unrest, as well as school closures) and expected to deal with serious challenges in the fall.”<sup>14</sup>

Some systems have recognized that teachers are also experiencing trauma and stress related to the pandemic and systemic racism. Systems such as Aldine Independent School District in Texas have partnered with the Pure Edge Foundation to promote self-care strategies among teachers to support their social-emotional needs.

## 7. Surveys and Feedback Loops

Another feature of successful systems was their ability to learn based on data — primarily student, parent, and staff surveys and internal feedback loops that let the central office know how implementation was going for teachers and other frontline staff. Broward County, for example, conducted a reopening schools survey and got 65,000 responses. Miami-Dade’s school reopening plan for the fall drew on survey and social media feedback from over 250,000 families.<sup>15</sup>

“One of the things that was really important was frequent feedback cycles on all different levels — parent, student, teacher surveys,” said one expert. “The schools doing well were taking this almost weekly pulse and tweaking and acting on feedback. The feedback cycles were huge.”

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<sup>13</sup> Aspen Education and Society Program, *Coherence: Using a Holistic View to Set a Coherent Strategy for Recovery and Renewal*, webinar, July 16, 2020, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/events/coherence-webinar/>.

<sup>14</sup> Hill, *Lessons from Remote Learning*.

<sup>15</sup> Collaborative for Student Success and Center on Reinventing Public Education, *Promising Practices Emerge from Expert Peer Review of District Reopening Plans* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2020), [https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/1css\\_crpe\\_promisingpractices\\_final.pdf](https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/1css_crpe_promisingpractices_final.pdf).

Among the 50-plus districts ANet worked with this past summer, the biggest gap was around data for progress monitoring. Systems also are struggling to devise processes and indicators to measure the success of their academic recovery plans. Districts that systematically collected data on family engagement, student engagement, and attendance in the spring had a much richer data set for understanding student needs going into the fall. For example, San Antonio Independent School District created and launched a student interaction tracker app that logs each interaction staff members have with students, whether students submit assignments, and whether they participate in classes.<sup>16</sup>

Still, big questions remain about what data to collect, especially around students' academic progress. While some districts will not have any common student assessment data this school year, others are falling back on commercial products that may or may not be aligned with their curricula.

## Looking Ahead

Given the lack of data from this past spring, the factors identified in this paper as supporting an effective transition to remote instruction remain suggestive rather than conclusive. Working to collect more detailed and consistent data across multiple sites will be important moving forward. As school systems navigate an unpredictable 2020–21 school year, understanding how to deliver high-quality teaching and learning at scale — particularly for the most vulnerable students — remains vital. Carnegie Corporation of New York is committed to sharing what its grantees are learning with the field to contribute to that conversation.

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<sup>16</sup> Collaborative for Student Success and Center on Reinventing Public Education, *Promising Practices*.

## Experts Interviewed

**Andy Calkins**, Director, Next Generation Learning Challenges; **Karen Cator**, President and CEO, Digital Promise; **Stacey Childress**, CEO, NewSchools Venture Fund; **Julia Freeland Fisher**, Director of Education, The Clayton Christensen Institute; **Emily Freitag**, CEO, Instruction Partners; **Chong-Hao Fu**, CEO, Leading Educators; **Lynne Graziano**, Analyst, Bellwether Education Partners; **Sarah Johnson**, CEO, Teaching Lab; **Robin Lake**, Director, Center on Reinventing Public Education; **Mike Magee**, CEO, Chiefs for Change; **Karen Hawley Miles**, CEO and President, Education Resource Strategies; **Beth Rabbitt**, CEO, The Learning Accelerator; **Paul Reville**, Director, The Education Redesign Lab, Harvard Graduate School of Education; **Mora Segal**, CEO, Achievement Network; **Jennifer Vranek**, Founding partner, Education First; **Chelsea Waite**, Research Fellow, The Clayton Christensen Institute; and **Ross Wiener**, Executive Director, Education and Society Program, The Aspen Institute.

## Further Reading on System Responses to COVID-19:

Bellwether Education Partners, *Promise in the Time of Quarantine: Exploring Schools' Responses to COVID-19*, <https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/PromiseInQuarantineBellwetherFinal.pdf>

Center on Reinventing Public Education, ongoing analyses of school district and state responses to COVID-19, <https://www.crpe.org/current-research/about-work>

Chiefs for Change, "Schools and COVID-19: How Districts and State Education Systems Are Responding to the Pandemic," <https://schoolsandcovid19.org/>

Collaborative for Student Success and Center on Reinventing Public Education, *Promising Practices Emerge from Expert Peer Review of District Reopening Plans*, [https://forstudentsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CSS\\_CRPE\\_PromisingPractices\\_FINAL.pdf](https://forstudentsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CSS_CRPE_PromisingPractices_FINAL.pdf)

Education First, *Opportunities in the Midst of COVID-19: Innovative Ways States Are Using This Moment to Rethink Public Education*, <https://education-first.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Rethink-Pub-Final1.pdf>



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