



## **ABOUT THE FELLOW**

Upneet Singh Atwal is a current M.P.S. Urban and Regional Planning student at Georgetown University, focusing on community and economic development. He is passionate about helping minority and immigrant communities grow socially and economically. His interests include the areas of education, racial equity, youth development, and community-economic development. He earned his B.S. in Business Management and Entrepreneurship from the University of Maryland, College Park, and his A.A. in Business from Montgomery College. Upneet has been a resident of Montgomery County for most of his life, having lived in Gaithersburg, Rockville, and Silver Spring. He currently sits on the Board of Governors for the Montgomery College Alumni Association, and serves as a mentor to local youth.

## **OVERVIEW**

Educating and engaging underrepresented youth within Montgomery County is essential to achieving racial, social, and economic equity. Montgomery County must move to expand cohesive programs and pathways for underrepresented and at-risk youth to achieve higher levels of educational attainment. Currently programs and pathways exist in the most distressed neighborhoods, but they are extremely siloed and often are unable to scale. This report provides recommendations to better utilize and support our already existing programs and pathways, to better serve the most underrepresented and at-risk youth.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## Executive Summary

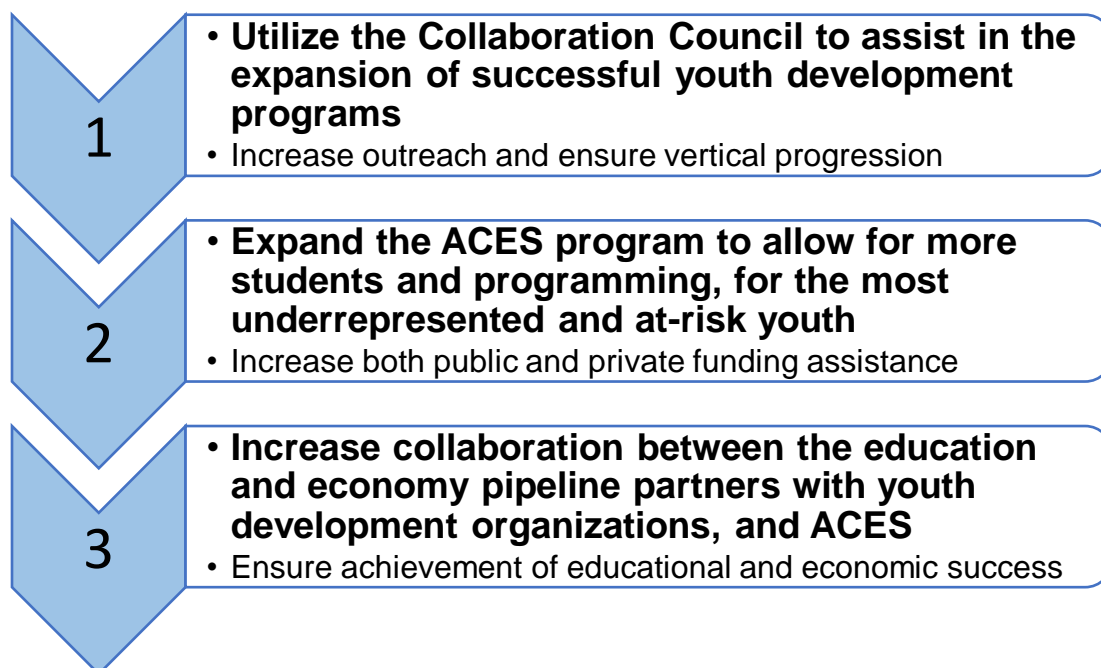
### BACKGROUND

Equitable education of underrepresented and at-risk youth is the process of encouraging youth underrepresented in higher education to pursue and enroll in higher education institutions post-secondary education<sup>1</sup>. Equitable engagement of underrepresented and at-risk youth demonstrates a commitment to an inclusive process of engaging young people in their communities, and decision making, that yields benefits for them as they transition into adulthood<sup>23</sup>.

Youth, for the purposes of this report, is defined as individuals between the ages of 14 and 24. Underrepresented and at-risk, for the purposes of this report, is the identification of youth from 14 specific census tracts in Montgomery County, Maryland. The identified census tracts are both the lowest income tracts in the county, and the census tracts with the lowest level of education attainment for the age group 25 and over.

A successful framework for achieving these equity goals in Montgomery County encompasses the expansion of community-based youth development programs, and county-led higher education enrollment programs. In addition, the already existing, and successful, secondary education to workforce pathway must be utilized to better serve the most underrepresented and at-risk youth in Montgomery County. The existing pathway and program are a partnership between Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery College, The Universities at Shady Grove, and businesses part of the local economy.

### RECOMMENDATIONS



## DATA HIGHLIGHTS

Montgomery County median household income is \$109,372

26 Census tracts are low-income, meaning median incomes are less than 65% (\$71,091) of the county median

14 of these tracts have a predominant level of education of "some college-no degree" or less

Median household income within these tracts is between \$47,067 and \$67,237, with block medians as low as \$33,000

Youth from these census tracts attend the 11 lowest performing schools within MCPS

Graduation rates at these schools are as low as 75%, with dropout rates as high as 16%, and ever-FARMS as high as 83%

Area	Tract	Income	Education	School
Gaithersburg	24031700724	\$47,067	Less than 9th Grade	Gaithersburg HS
Montgomery Village	24031700721	\$53,420	HS graduate or equivalent	Watkins Mill HS
Germantown	24031700713	\$53,962	HS graduate or equivalent	Watkins Mill HS
	24031700818	\$64,204	Some college (no degree)	Seneca Valley HS
	24031700719	\$66,354	HS graduate or equivalent	Gaithersburg HS
Aspen Hill	24031703213	\$47,728	HS graduate or equivalent	DCC
Wheaton	24031703207	\$65,632	HS graduate or equivalent	DCC
Glenmont	24031703501	\$66,426	HS graduate or equivalent	DCC
	24031703404	\$67,237	HS graduate or equivalent	DCC
Fairland	24031701422	\$52,355	Some college (no degree)	NEC
White Oak	24031701509	\$54,766	Some college (no degree)	NEC
Hillandale	24031702000	\$56,055	Less than 9th Grade	DCC
Long Branch	24031702101	\$59,484	HS graduate or equivalent	DCC
Silver Spring	24031701601	\$62,611	Some college (no degree)	DCC

School	Ever-FARMS	Graduation Rate	Dropout Rate	% Of Students Meeting USM Entrance Requirements
<b>All MCPS High Schools</b>	<b>47.7%</b>	<b>89.2%</b>	<b>6.2%</b>	<b>64.6%</b>
Gaithersburg High School (UpCounty)	75%	76.5%	14.3%	58.2%
Watkins Mill High School (UpCounty)	81.8%	81.2%	9.6%	48.1%
Seneca Valley High School (UpCounty)	69.6%	85.9%	6.3%	38.1%
Paint Branch High School (NEC)	68.2%	92.4%	5.2%	62.7%
Blake High School (NEC)	60.6%	92.1%	≤5%	65.4%
Springbrook High School (NEC)	74.7%	85.2%	8.9%	58.5%
John F. Kennedy High School (DCC)	82.8%	79.9%	12.2%	23.6%
Wheaton High School (DCC)	76.6%	84.4%	10.3%	63.2%
Albert Einstein High School (DCC)	65.7%	80.6%	12.5%	53.1%
Montgomery Blair High School (DCC)	53.6%	86.1%	8.8%	62.9%
Northwood High School (DCC)	73.7%	79.2%	15.9%	48.1%

\*Data<sup>456</sup>

## Research Introduction

### DEFINITIONS

Underrepresented & At-risk Youth	Adolescents between the ages of 14 and 24, who live in the most distressed neighborhoods within Montgomery County. These youth attend the lowest performing schools within MCPS.
Education & Engagement	The process of educating and engaging youth on available educational support, higher education opportunities, and opportunities to assist in improving their community, and themselves.
Distressed Neighborhoods	The 14 census tracts within Montgomery County that have the lowest levels of median household income, and the lowest levels of education attainment for the age group 25 and over.
Equity	A goal for when geographic location, or life circumstances, do not predict the outcomes for underrepresented and at-risk youth.

### GOALS

**Early Intervention:** Ensuring that underrepresented and at-risk youth are identified and selected to be part of a youth development program at the age of 14

**Transition & Support:** Ensuring that underrepresented and at-risk youth have a guaranteed pathway from a youth development program to being part of ACES

**Focused Pipeline:** Expand education and economic opportunity to better serve youth from distressed neighborhoods, to contribute to individual and community growth

## METHODOLOGY

Identify the most distressed census tracts, in an effort to better understand where the most underrepresented and at-risk youth reside.

Consult MCPS teachers, Montgomery College Staff, The Universities at Shady Grove Staff, and community organizations to understand how they address inequities in education and engagement

Determine what gold-standard youth development programs, county-led programs, and education to economy pipelines exist and are successful

Understand and communicate both short and long-term strategies to better educate and engage the most underrepresented and at-risk youth.

Create next step recommendations for Montgomery County Council members to act on, in order to increase the success of gold-standard programs and collaboration between themselves.

## EDUCATION & ENGAGEMENT: WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Better educating youth from distressed neighborhoods and engaging them in their communities is key to being inclusive in policy and decision-making processes, while also contributing to their personal, educational, and professional growth<sup>7</sup>. Youth in Montgomery County who come from low-income households, defined as having a median income that is 2/3 of the area median income, also tend to have less resources available to better educate and engage themselves<sup>8</sup>.

The predominant level of education analysis shows that simple issues are further exacerbated due to inadequate academic support from family and friends. Understanding that youth from distressed neighborhoods do not share the same liberties as their peers from more affluent neighborhoods is the first step. **However, it is important to not only understand the issues, but also implement and support more equitable education and engagement programming.** As a result, Montgomery County will create more equitable outcomes that result in higher levels of academic achievement, the creation of positive community culture, and the creation of positive personal and social habits of underrepresented and at-risk youth.



## Findings

### WHY DO DISPARITIES EXIST?

Underrepresented and at-risk youth reside in the most distressed neighborhoods in Montgomery County, and face many issues that lead to lower levels of academic achievement and engagement compared to their peers from more affluent neighborhoods. **Not to be overlooked is the further exacerbation of these issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic**, which has made life harder for those who were already struggling.

Issues that at-risk youth face include inadequate personal and academic support, financial barriers, food insecurity, access to healthcare, gang/judicial system involvement, and/or behavioral and physical health issues<sup>9</sup>. All have heavy impacts on the future success of a child; However, by cultivating the minds of underrepresented and at-risk youth through education, we can begin to ensure their academic and personal growth<sup>10</sup>.

- **Of the 14 distressed neighborhoods identified, 10 contain an identified neighborhood gang<sup>11</sup>.** Many youths who become burdened with life's issues turn towards gang activities due to a lack of stability in the home, to profit off illegal activities, or for protection<sup>12</sup>. Lack of academic support and out-of-school engagement are key factors in determining whether youth will affiliate themselves with a gang<sup>13</sup>.
- **Most of the youth from the identified distressed neighborhoods lack academic support, because their families lack prior academic experience post-secondary school.** Of the 14 identified census tracts, only 4 have a predominant level of education of some college, with 8 having a predominant level of education of high school graduate or equivalent, and 2 tracts having a predominant level that is equivalent to 9<sup>th</sup> grade-level education or less<sup>14</sup>.
- **Families from the identified distressed neighborhoods lack the financial means to enroll their children in out-of-school academic support programs.** Families within the identified tracts are making less than 66% of the median income for Montgomery County, with some tracts being as low as 43% of the AMI. A closer look into the census block data shows that some micro-neighborhoods are even making as low as 30% of the AMI<sup>15</sup>. Many of these families are living paycheck-to-paycheck and cannot afford extracurricular activities for their youth household members.
- **With lower household incomes comes a myriad of other issues, such as spending tradeoffs<sup>16</sup>.** Having to decide whether to buy groceries, or pay healthcare bills, is one of the many tradeoffs that families tackle in their daily lives. These tradeoffs translate to increased stress for youth, and lead to lack of interest in academics, engagement in risky behaviors, and the desire to mitigate family financial issues through legal income rather than focus one education<sup>1718</sup>.

## WHAT IS A GOLD-STANDARD PROGRAM?

Gold-standard programs, for the purpose of this report, is defined as being a program that provides full-circle guidance of youth from educational assistance to community engagement, and personal growth and development opportunities.

A guiding question for the creation of this report was, “Does Montgomery County have gold-standard programs that can tackle the issue of inequitable education and engagement of the most underrepresented and at-risk youth”. The answer is yes, and **there are currently several existing gold-standard programs which are very successful in better educating and engaging underrepresented and at-risk youth.** These include both youth development organizations, and county-led programs. However, these programs are often siloed from each other, or do not have the financial means to scale to greater levels in order to serve more youth in need. As a result, these identified programs are only reaching a fraction of their fullest potential.

In addition, this section will highlight an already existing and successful gold-standard pathway that exists in Montgomery County for youth to not only achieve completion of a post-secondary degree, but also become part of the local workforce. In turn this pathway aids in creating educational and financial opportunity for youth, while also strengthening the local economy. Nevertheless, the existing and successful pathway can be leveraged to better serve the most underrepresented and at-risk youth in the county.

## YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Several youth development organizations exist within Montgomery County with the mission of assisting in the academics and engagement of underrepresented and at-risk youth. Many of these organizations provide academic support through no-cost tutoring, mentorship, testing assistance, and now virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, many of these organizations take a further step into the lives of youth from distressed neighborhoods, and engage them through mentorship programs, self-advocating, community events, food-drives, leadership and personal/professional development opportunities. **In order to equitably educate and engage underrepresented and at-risk youth in Montgomery County, we must better support existing and successful youth development organizations.** Highlighted below is The BROTHERS Academy, the focus group for youth development organizations in this report, as well as other youth development organizations that conduct similar work.



**The BROTHERS Academy:** The mission of the organization is, “building healthy and positive communities with educational and essential resource support is the most effective way to improve academic achievement amongst disenfranchised youth”<sup>19</sup>. This organization was chosen as the focus group, because they maintain a full-cycle framework that not only ensures the immediate academic success of their youth, but also ensures long-term mental and physical growth and success.

100% Graduate High School | 70% Attend College | 30% Learn a Trade

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**Purpose:** Enhancing educational equity; Children who grow up impoverished complete fewer years of schooling and earn much lower income than people who did not grow up poor<sup>21</sup>.

**Vision:** Focused investment in the educational equity of disenfranchised youth leading to equal opportunity.

**Principles:** (1) Education, pursuit of knowledge and truth; (2) Health, health is wealth; (3) Mentorship, each one reaches one; and (4) Community, together is greater.

**Education Management:** The first leg of their framework is the focus on helping underrepresented and at-risk youth succeed in their academic goals.

- (1) They utilize an academic organization platform called Naviance to provide:
  - College Planning
  - Academic Planning
  - Career Planning
  - Success Planning
  - Social Emotional Learning & Self Discovery
- (2) They utilize Revolution Prep at no-cost for students to receive tutoring aid:
  - Test prep for SAT, ACT, PSAT, and AP classes
  - After-hours homework support – Unlimited access for students
  - Advisor oversight for any academic related guidance
- (3) They provide students the opportunity to attend the no-cost annual college tour:
  - East Coast overnight college tour that spans from University of Maryland in Maryland, to Morehouse College in Georgia
  - Students attend college-ready seminars, community activities, site visits, and personal tours by alumni of The BROTHERS Academy or campus representatives

Physical & Mental Health: The second leg of their framework is the focus on improving overall health to ensure the academic and personal success of the youth in the program.

- (1) The organization leads a physical training program designed to:
  - Emphasize the pursuit of excellence through personal development and teamwork
  - Develop ethical and responsible behavior on and off the field
  - Influence the adherence to the spirit of rules as well as to the commitment to team values
  - Create leadership skills and strength of character
  - Understand the acceptance of victory with humility, and defeat with grace
  
- (2) BROTHERS utilize BetterHelp to promote mental wellness:
  - Ability to message therapists anytime and from anywhere
  - Schedule live sessions to speak confidentially
  - Give students an outlet that they can trust to develop good habits

Mentorship: The third leg of their framework is providing students with a guide and mentor that assists them through their high school career, and further.

- (1) Their mentorship model is as follows:
  - Alumni with certain education levels and expertise in specific fields are matched with mentee's who have similar interests
  - Alumni with professional experience in certain industries are matched with mentee's through a *career and personality assessment*
  - All mentees are matched with mentors who have the available time commitment that is requested, or needed

Community: Cohorts & Small Groups: The final leg of The BROTHERS Academy framework is the creation of cohorts and small groups that build a stronger community for underrepresented and at-risk youth, while also providing training and development. Both programs additionally include the mentorship model, and continuing feedback for improvement of the program and of the youth. In addition, these groups emphasize community service and support.

- (1) Programming cohorts build community through engagement check-ins, guest speakers, and developmental deliverables
  
- (2) Academy small groups provide students and alumni the ability to gain training and development through subject matter expert conversations, setting real attainable goals (RAGs), and supporting resources in the community

**Identity Inc.:** A youth development organization that empowers Latino youth to reach their highest potential, and work towards a successful transition into adulthood. The organization envisions a just and equitable society that nurtures all youth and is enriched by their contributions and engagement<sup>22</sup>. They also provide broad array of programs and services focused on supporting the physical, social, emotional, and mental well-being of the students throughout their high-school years<sup>23</sup>.

**Liberty's Promise:** A youth development organization that supports low-income immigrant youth between the ages of 15 and 21. They provide youth with the means to become actively involved in civic life, pursue higher education, and embark upon meaningful careers<sup>24</sup>.

**Boys to Men:** A development program through Montgomery College that fosters long-term academic success in African American and Black male students. The program provides academic, career, and personal mentoring opportunities<sup>25</sup>.

**480 Club:** An athletic program that teaches youth to become better athletes and better people, through off-season trainings. They focus on middle and high school aged youth, and provide enrichment programs that develop accountability and discipline.

## **COUNTY-LED PROGRAM**

A successful county-led framework that exists and is successful in aiding in the growth and development of underrepresented youth, is the ACES program.

**ACES, achieving collegiate excellence and success:** Is a program that operates in the 14 lowest performing schools within MCPS. They provide a supportive pathway to completion of a bachelor's degree, for youth who are underrepresented in higher education. They have limited enrollment capacity for each school year.

**Core Services Provided:** What ACES does to ensure success of their youth

- Individualized academic coaching
- College application and financial aid support
- Transition support to community college, then a 4-year institution, and finally, into a career
- Leadership development programming
- Career readiness training and skills

If students follow the pathway from MCPS to Montgomery College to a 4-year institution at The Universities at Shady Grove, they can attain a bachelor's degree at little to no cost. Below are some other highlights of the organization's success:

- 99% of ACES high school seniors graduate successfully
- ACES students are 2 times as likely to receive financial aid/scholarships
- 84.2% of students remain at Montgomery College for 2 years, versus a retention rate of 64.8% among their peers

## EDUCATION TO ECONOMY PIPELINE

Finally, the last gold-standard program to highlight is the education to economy pipeline that exists within Montgomery County, and is very successful. This pipeline creates the ability for students to leave Montgomery County Public Schools, complete an associate or equivalent at Montgomery College, and complete their undergraduate or graduate studies at a program offered at The Universities at Shady Grove (USG). Unlike Montgomery College, which offers a wide array of programs, certificates, and degrees, all degrees at USG directly translate into the needs of the Montgomery County Economy. Youth that take this pathway to complete their undergraduate studies end up saving thousands more dollars than their peers who take the “traditional” higher education route of going straight to a 4-year institution out of high school. In addition, all campuses are located within Montgomery County making it easier to stay close to home, and/or balance employment obligations outside of school, both of which are very important to underrepresented and at-risk youth who would not otherwise have the financial means to move away or leave a job.

According to an alumni survey conducted by USG, the top 3 benefits of attending classes at the campus are:

- (1) Personalized relationships with professors and faculty
- (2) Student services that are focused on a smaller student population
- (3) Campus resources that are available to students of all programs at USG

Completing a 4-year undergraduate degree at The Universities at Shady Grove also causes less of a need to take out financial loans, **with only 39% of students attending programs at USG taking out a loan, versus the national average of 69%.**

There are also several guaranteed pathways to admittance between Montgomery College and The Universities at Shady Grove, making it much simpler and easier for students to be ensured that they will have a shot at completing their undergraduate studies. These include:

- (1) Terp Transfer Partnership: A guaranteed pathway from Montgomery College into a degree program offered by the University of Maryland, College Park
- (2) Raptor to Retriever: A guaranteed pathway from Montgomery College into a degree program offered by the University of Maryland, Baltimore County
- (3) Bee Line: A guaranteed pathway from Montgomery College into a degree program offered by the University of Baltimore
- (4) Hawk Line: A guaranteed pathway from Montgomery College into a degree program offered by the University of Maryland, Eastern Shore

Lower tuition at Montgomery College, compared to 4-year institutions, combined with lower campus fees and increased scholarship opportunities at USG make the pipeline a very affordable option. **Students who leave MCPS and attend a community college in Maryland, and then transfer to a program at USG spend \$26,000, which is over**

**\$50,000 less than taking the “traditional” pathway of going from MCPS straight to a 4-year institution<sup>26</sup>.**

Other key benefits for underrepresented and at-risk youth include smaller class sizes, leadership opportunity, and community engagement opportunity through various student and professional events. After completing their degree at USG, students are prepared and trained to enter the workforce right here in Montgomery County, making it an easy transition and providing the opportunity to underrepresented and at-risk youth to contribute back to their communities.

## **Recommendations: Strategies and Next Steps**

### **SHORT & LONG-TERM STRATEGIES**

**Early intervention:** Ensuring that underrepresented and at-risk youth are identified and brought into development programs, such as The BROTHERS Academy, at the age of 14 (around the beginning of high school). This short-term strategy ensures that we are not allowing students to apply, or elect, to be part of programs, but being more proactive and selective.

**Stronger transition and support:** Ensuring that underrepresented and at-risk youth have a guaranteed pathway to being part of the ACES program, through direct recommendations from their youth development program. This short-term strategy ensures that youth who would benefit the most from a program like ACES, are given a fair and direct opportunity.

**Education to economy pipeline:** Focus on having underrepresented and at-risk youth achieve higher levels of educational attainment, personal and professional growth, and financial gain right here in Montgomery County, by following the MCPS-MC-USG pathway. This long-term strategy ensures the convenience of completing a higher education degree close to home, while also allowing underrepresented and at-risk youth the opportunity to support their communities socially and financially.

### **NEXT STEPS**

**Utilize the Montgomery County Collaboration Council to:**

- Increase grassroots level outreach, in regard to being part of a youth development organization such as The BROTHERS Academy, to the identified communities in which our most underrepresented and at-risk youth live within.
- Ensure that identified youth, once within the program, have vertical progression towards completing post-secondary education at Montgomery College and The Universities at Shady Grove.

**Expand the ACES program to better serve the most underrepresented and at-risk youth:**

- Increase both public and private funding for this collaborative program between MCPS, MC, and USG.
- Create a guaranteed pathway from being part of a youth development, such as The BROTHERS Academy, organization to being part of ACES.
- Increase the number of students allowed into the program each year, to ensure students from the identified communities are enrolled.

**Increase collaboration between MCPS, MC, USG, ACES, and youth developments orgs.**

- Ensure that communication between all parts of the higher education process is occurring and is strong.
- Conduct quarterly and yearly assessments to determine whether utilizing the pathway is contributing to the academic success of underrepresented and at-risk youth, at all levels.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Montgomery County must take the necessary steps to equitably educate and engage the most underrepresented and at-risk youth within the county. While the county, and local nonprofits, are doing great work to tackle issues that youth from distressed neighborhoods face, there is room for improvement. Focusing our time, efforts, and resources towards youth development organizations who are successful in their work, and towards existing county-led programs will help to shorten the learning and professional growth gap between the identified youth and their peers from more affluent areas. Utilizing both short and long-term strategies, in conjunction with taking the proper next steps, will lead to higher levels of education attainment, greater personal and professional growth, and financial gain for underrepresented and at-risk youth in Montgomery County:

- **Early intervention**
- **Education to economy pipeline**
- **Utilize the Montgomery County Collaboration Council**
- **Expand the ACES program to better serve the most underrepresented and at-risk youth**
- **Increase collaboration between MCPS, MC, USG, ACES, and youth developments orgs**

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