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POLICY GAPS IN THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHER EDUCATION AND CERTIFICATION IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The quality of teachers remains a decisive factor in determining the effectiveness of educational systems. In Nigeria, however, persistent challenges associated with teacher preparation, professional certification, recruitment and continuous professional development continue to undermine efforts to improve educational standards. This paper examines the legal and policy framework regulating teacher education and certification in Nigeria, identifies gaps in its implementation and analyses the implications for teachers' professional development. The discussion focuses on the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) Act No. 31 of 1993 and the National Policy on Education, which provide the principal regulatory foundation for teacher qualification, registration and professional practice. It also considers recent policy developments, particularly the September 2025 directive linking TRCN certification to the accreditation of secondary school examination centres. The paper identifies significant challenges, including teacher shortages, weak recruitment practices, inadequate enforcement of certification requirements, insufficient funding, poor remuneration and limited access to continuing professional development. Available estimates indicate a shortage of approximately 278,000 teachers at basic education levels and a national teacher-pupil ratio of about 1:35, compared with the recommended ratio of 1:25. The paper further highlights concerns surrounding the Professional Qualifying Examination, the validity period for examination results and the limited implementation of structured career progression. It argues that the existence of regulatory provisions is insufficient without institutional capacity, sustainable funding and effective implementation. The paper recommends strengthening TRCN's regulatory capacity, improving teacher recruitment and welfare, expanding accessible professional development programmes and operationalising competency-based career pathways. It concludes that effective teacher regulation must integrate professional entry requirements with sustained opportunities for teachers' professional growth.

Keywords: Teacher education, teacher certification, TRCN, professional development, teacher shortage, educational quality, Nigeria Certificate in Education, Professional Qualifying Examination.

Introduction

Teachers occupy a central position in every educational system because they translate curriculum intentions into actual learning experiences. The quality of instruction learners receive is closely connected to teachers' professional knowledge, pedagogical competence, commitment and ability to respond to changing educational demands. Even where curricula are well designed, facilities are adequate and modern technologies are available, the achievement of educational objectives ultimately depends on the competence of teachers responsible for delivering instruction. The preparation, certification and continuous professional development of teachers are therefore important concerns in educational policy and administration.

The recognition of teaching as a specialised profession has encouraged the establishment of regulatory arrangements intended to define professional standards and determine who is qualified to practise. In Nigeria, the establishment of the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) followed sustained advocacy for a regulatory institution capable of strengthening the professional status of teaching. The Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria Act No. 31 of 1993 provided the statutory foundation for regulating entry into the profession, prescribing professional standards and maintaining a register of qualified teachers. The legislation recognises the need for appropriate professional preparation and accountability as essential conditions for effective teaching (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1993; Arah,2017).

The importance of these regulatory arrangements becomes clearer when considered against the challenges confronting Nigeria's teaching workforce. Teacher shortages, uneven distribution of qualified personnel, inadequate professional preparation and limited opportunities for continuing development continue to affect educational delivery. Estimates reported in 2025 indicate a shortage of approximately 278,000 teachers at basic education levels. Available figures also suggest that 915,593 teachers serve about 31.8 million pupils in public and private primary schools, resulting in a teacher-pupil ratio of approximately 1:35, compared with the recommended ratio of 1:25 (Nnah & George, 2025). These figures point to a significant imbalance between the demand for teachers and the available workforce.

The problem is not limited to the number of teachers available. Arah (2017), noted that the effectiveness of the teaching workforce is also influenced by recruitment practices, professional qualifications, regulatory compliance and opportunities for teachers to update their knowledge and skills. Reports indicate that several states experienced prolonged periods without teacher recruitment between 2019 and 2024, while teacher attrition and migration have further weakened workforce capacity. Low remuneration, inadequate professional support and limited career advancement opportunities contribute to the difficulty of attracting and retaining qualified teachers (Punch Newspapers, 2025).

Government has introduced additional measures to strengthen professional accountability and improve compliance with certification requirements. In September 2025, the Federal Ministry of Education announced a directive linking TRCN certification to the eligibility of secondary schools

to serve as centres for national examinations, including WASSCE, NECO, NABTEB and NBIAS. The directive established a target of 75 per cent certification compliance by 2026 and full compliance by 2027 (TVC News, 2025). By connecting teacher certification with examination-centre accreditation, the policy seeks to encourage schools to regularise the professional status of their teaching personnel.

Nevertheless, the introduction of regulatory requirements does not automatically guarantee effective implementation. The number of teachers requiring certification, the financial implications of compliance, the administrative capacity of TRCN and the availability of appropriate professional preparation programmes all influence the success of the policy. Similar concerns arise in relation to continuous professional development, which remains inadequately accessible to many practising teachers despite its importance for maintaining professional competence.

Against this background, this paper examines the legal and policy foundations of teacher education and certification in Nigeria, considers the challenges affecting their implementation and analyses the implications for teachers' professional development. It argues that effective teacher regulation requires more than the existence of legislation; it depends on institutional capacity, adequate funding, coordinated workforce planning and sustained opportunities for professional growth.

Conceptual and Legal Foundations of Teacher Education and Certification in Nigeria

Teacher education refers to the systematic preparation of individuals for teaching through academic study, pedagogical training, supervised professional experience and continuing learning. It equips prospective teachers with subject knowledge, instructional skills, classroom management competencies and professional values required for effective teaching. Teacher certification, on the other hand, refers to the formal recognition that an individual has satisfied the prescribed academic and professional requirements for practising as a teacher.

Although teacher education and certification are closely related, they perform different functions. Teacher education develops professional knowledge and competence, while certification establishes whether an individual meets the recognised standards for professional practice. Effective regulation therefore requires a relationship between the institutions responsible for teacher preparation and the body responsible for professional registration.

As noted by Arah (2025), the legal framework for teacher education and certification in Nigeria is anchored principally on the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria Act No. 31 of 1993. The Act established TRCN as the statutory body responsible for determining the standards of knowledge and skills required of teachers, maintaining a register of qualified teachers and regulating the teaching profession. Section 1 assigns the Council responsibility for determining and reviewing professional standards in response to changing educational and professional demands (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1993).

These statutory responsibilities give TRCN an important role in regulating the quality of the teaching workforce. The Council is expected to oversee professional entry requirements, maintain registration records, promote professional standards and ensure that individuals engaged in teaching satisfy the applicable qualification requirements. The Act therefore provides a legal basis for recognising teaching as a regulated profession rather than an occupation open to anyone possessing subject knowledge alone.

The National Policy on Education complements the TRCN Act by specifying the academic and professional qualifications expected of teachers at different levels of the education system. The policy identifies the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) as the minimum qualification for teaching at the basic education level. At the secondary education level, recognised qualifications include a Bachelor's Degree in Education or a relevant non-education degree combined with a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013).

The adoption of the NCE as the minimum qualification reflects an effort to establish a consistent professional foundation for teaching. The qualification framework recognises that effective teachers require both subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical preparation. However, the practical achievement of this objective depends on the availability of qualified personnel, the quality of teacher education institutions and the consistency with which employers apply the prescribed standards.

Beyond academic qualifications, professional registration constitutes another essential requirement for entry into the teaching profession. The TRCN framework provides for the Professional Qualifying Examination (PQE), which assesses candidates' readiness for professional practice. The examination is intended to determine whether prospective teachers possess the professional knowledge and competencies required for registration. It provides an additional quality assurance mechanism beyond the possession of academic qualifications.

The PQE is designed to strengthen public confidence in teaching by establishing a common professional assessment standard. However, the administration of the examination has generated concerns regarding the period within which successful candidates may complete their registration. In 2024, TRCN announced that PQE results would remain valid for one year. Candidates who passed the examination were consequently expected to complete their registration within twelve months or retake the examination (Premium Times, 2024).

The policy was intended to discourage candidates from delaying the completion of their registration after passing the examination. Nevertheless, it attracted opposition from student representatives, who argued that the one-year validity period could impose additional financial obligations on candidates experiencing economic difficulties. The controversy raises an important policy question concerning the balance between regulatory efficiency and accessibility. While professional standards require timely registration, the regulatory process should also provide

reasonable opportunities for successful candidates to complete the required administrative procedures.

The TRCN framework also recognises professional categories associated with teachers' academic qualifications and professional development. These categories reflect different levels of professional attainment and are intended to provide a basis for recognising teachers' qualifications and advancement. However, the relationship between professional categories, career progression, remuneration and promotion require clearer implementation arrangements across states and school systems.

Mandatory registration is intended to ensure that individuals practising as teachers meet established professional requirements. The TRCN Act provides enforcement powers, including provisions for addressing unregistered teaching practice. However, the existence of these powers has not eliminated the employment of uncertified teachers. Effective enforcement depends on the Council's capacity to monitor schools, verify professional status and apply the law consistently.

Policy Gaps in Teacher Education and Certification

Inadequate alignment between academic qualifications and professional certification

One important policy challenge concerns the relationship between academic qualification and professional certification. Possession of an NCE, Bachelor of Education or relevant degree with a PGDE may satisfy the academic requirements for teaching, but professional registration involves additional regulatory procedures. The distinction is important because academic qualifications do not automatically establish that an individual has completed all the requirements for professional registration.

However, the processes for moving from academic qualification to professional certification are not always sufficiently coordinated. Graduates may encounter delays in obtaining registration, completing the PQE or securing the necessary documentation. Where these processes are expensive, cumbersome or poorly communicated, eligible candidates may remain outside the professional register despite possessing recognised academic qualifications. The policy framework therefore needs clearer arrangements for coordinating teacher education institutions, TRCN and employers. Institutions responsible for teacher preparation should provide prospective teachers with accurate information about professional registration, while TRCN should ensure that examination and registration procedures are accessible, transparent and efficiently administered.

Weak enforcement of professional certification requirements

Although the TRCN Act establishes a regulatory framework for professional registration, enforcement remains a major challenge. Some individuals continue to practise as teachers without completing the required registration procedures. This may result from limited awareness of regulatory requirements, financial difficulties, weak monitoring or the deliberate disregard of professional standards by employers. The challenge is particularly significant where school proprietors employ individuals without verifying their professional status. In some instances,

shortages of qualified personnel may encourage employers to appoint teachers who have not completed the prescribed certification process. Where monitoring is inconsistent, such practices weaken the authority of the regulatory framework.

The September 2025 directive linking examination-centre accreditation to TRCN certification represents an attempt to address these compliance weaknesses. Under the directive, secondary schools are expected to ensure that their teachers obtain TRCN certification to qualify their institutions as centres for recognised national examinations. The targets of 75 per cent compliance by 2026 and full compliance by 2027 introduce institutional incentives for schools to regularise the professional status of their teachers (TVC News, 2025). However, the success of this measure depends on an efficient system for processing applications, conducting examinations, issuing certificates and verifying professional status. Given the number of teachers who may require certification, the policy places considerable administrative demands on TRCN. Enforcement must therefore be supported by adequate personnel, reliable information systems and accessible registration procedures.

Teacher shortages and recruitment challenges

The shortage of qualified teachers constitutes one of the most serious obstacles to the effective implementation of teacher education and certification policies in Nigeria. Regulatory standards can improve the quality of the teaching workforce only when sufficient numbers of qualified teachers are available to meet school needs. Available estimates indicate a shortage of approximately 278,000 teachers at basic education levels. Figures reported for 2025 suggest that 915,593 teachers serve about 31.8 million pupils in public and private primary schools, producing a teacher-pupil ratio of approximately 1:35, compared with the recommended ratio of 1:25 (Nnah & George, 2025). Such shortages affect teachers' workloads, classroom management, individual learner support and the implementation of the curriculum.

Weak recruitment practices have contributed to the imbalance. Reports indicate that several states did not recruit teachers for extended periods between 2019 and 2024. Prolonged recruitment inactivity suggests weaknesses in workforce planning and the ability of state governments to respond to staffing needs (Punch Newspapers, 2025).

Several factors account for these difficulties. Limited budgetary resources restrict the ability of governments to employ additional personnel, while administrative delays and bureaucratic procedures slow recruitment approvals. Inadequate workforce forecasting also makes it difficult to anticipate the number of teachers required as enrolment increases. The result is a continuing mismatch between the demand for teachers and the number available to provide instruction. The problem is intensified by teacher attrition. Low remuneration, delayed salary payments, limited career advancement and inadequate professional development can weaken teachers' willingness to remain in the profession. International migration also contributes to the loss of experienced personnel as other countries recruit Nigerian teachers under more attractive employment

conditions. These pressures reduce the capacity of the education system to retain trained teachers and maintain professional continuity.

Internal migration affects the distribution of teachers as well. Movement from rural communities to urban centres leaves some rural schools with inadequate staffing, even where the national workforce appears relatively substantial. This unequal distribution creates differences in access to qualified teachers and limits the capacity of underserved communities to provide quality education. The consequences of inadequate staffing extend beyond overcrowded classrooms. Teachers responsible for excessive numbers of pupils have fewer opportunities to provide individual attention, monitor learning progress and address learners' specific difficulties. Heavy workloads can also contribute to professional fatigue and reduced instructional effectiveness. In schools experiencing severe shortages, administrators may resort to multi-grade teaching or restrict the range of subjects offered.

Inadequate funding and institutional capacity

The effectiveness of teacher education and certification policies depends on the availability of adequate financial and institutional resources. TRCN requires funding for registration, examination administration, professional monitoring, database management and enforcement. Teacher education institutions also require resources for qualified lecturers, teaching practice, instructional facilities and quality assurance.

Similarly, state governments require adequate financial capacity to recruit teachers, pay salaries, provide professional development and maintain appropriate working conditions. Where education receives insufficient budgetary attention, the implementation of professional standards becomes difficult. Funding constraints may also prevent teachers from attending training programmes or completing certification requirements.

The problem is not limited to the amount allocated to education but also includes the extent to which available funds are accessed and utilised. Administrative weaknesses, delays in counterpart funding and inadequate institutional coordination may prevent educational agencies from benefiting fully from available grants and development initiatives. These shortcomings weaken the relationship between policy commitments and practical improvements in teacher quality.

Limited access to continuing professional development

Teacher certification establishes minimum conditions for professional entry, but it does not guarantee sustained competence throughout a teaching career. The knowledge and skills required for effective teaching change as curricula are revised, educational technologies develop, pedagogical approaches improve and learners' needs become more diverse. Teachers therefore require continuous opportunities to update their professional knowledge and improve their instructional practices. Despite this need, access to systematic professional development remains inadequate in many parts of Nigeria. A significant number of teachers depend on occasional workshops and seminars, which may not provide the sustained learning required to improve professional competence. Limited funding, inadequate training facilities and the absence of

coordinated professional development arrangements restrict opportunities for teachers to strengthen their skills.

Professional development should not be treated as an occasional activity. It requires a structured process involving needs assessment, training, mentoring, classroom application, professional reflection and evaluation. Without such arrangements, training may have limited influence on teachers' actual classroom practices.

Incomplete implementation of career progression policies

The TRCN Career Path Policy for the Teaching Profession, issued in 2020, provides a framework for linking professional development with career advancement. It outlines progressive stages of professional growth and recognises the importance of professional competence, performance and continuing development in determining advancement (Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria, 2020). The policy represents an effort to move career progression beyond a system based mainly on years of service towards one that recognises demonstrated professional competence. Under such an arrangement, teachers are expected to improve their knowledge, skills and professional practice as they advance through different career stages.

However, the policy has not been fully operationalised in many states. According to Arah (2020), the absence of clearly defined implementation structures, assessment procedures, funding arrangements and institutional responsibilities has limited its practical influence. Teachers may therefore lack clear information about the competencies required for advancement, the professional development activities available to them and the relationship between career progression and improved remuneration. A career pathway can contribute meaningfully to professional development only when it is supported by transparent assessment procedures, accessible training opportunities and tangible professional incentives. Without these conditions, the policy risks remaining an administrative framework with limited influence on teachers' professional motivation.

Inadequate preparation for emerging instructional demands

The professional development needs of teachers extend beyond the acquisition of initial teaching qualifications. Teachers require regular opportunities to update subject knowledge, strengthen instructional methodology and respond to changes in the educational environment. The increasing use of digital technology in education has created additional professional development demands. Online learning platforms, interactive software, virtual laboratories and multimedia resources have expanded the range of tools available for teaching and learning. However, teachers require more than basic technical familiarity to use these resources effectively. They must understand how to integrate technology into lesson preparation, classroom instruction, learner engagement and assessment.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses in teachers' digital competencies when schools were compelled to adopt remote instruction. Many teachers lacked the skills needed to operate

online platforms, develop digital learning materials, assess students remotely and sustain participation in virtual classrooms. This experience demonstrated that technology integration requires deliberate professional preparation rather than the mere provision of digital devices. Professional development must also address inclusive education, classroom management, assessment practices, learner diversity and emerging subject knowledge. A regulatory framework that concentrates primarily on entry qualifications without providing opportunities for continuing professional learning cannot fully achieve its objective of maintaining professional teaching standards.

Implications for Teachers' Professional Development

The policy and implementation gaps identified have important implications for the professional development of teachers in Nigeria. First, the relationship between certification and professional competence needs to be strengthened. While the TRCN Act provides a framework for regulating entry into teaching, the professional development needs of practising teachers require equally systematic attention. Teachers must be supported to maintain and improve their competence after obtaining initial certification. Registration should therefore be connected to continuing professional learning, professional ethics and periodic assessment of relevant competencies.

Second, teacher shortages and attrition affect the implementation of professional development policies. Schools operating with inadequate staff may find it difficult to release teachers for training without disrupting instructional activities. Teachers experiencing poor remuneration and limited career opportunities may also be less motivated to participate in professional development or remain in the profession. Recruitment, retention and professional development should therefore be treated as interconnected policy priorities.

Third, the effectiveness of regulatory enforcement depends on accessible pathways through which serving teachers can meet certification requirements. Where professional examinations, registration fees and training programmes impose excessive financial or administrative burdens, compliance may remain difficult. Bridging programmes and flexible professional learning arrangements can help address this challenge, provided that the quality of preparation is maintained.

Fourth, the TRCN Career Path Policy provides an opportunity to establish a more coherent relationship between professional development and career advancement. Its implementation should move beyond policy statements to clearly defined competency standards, assessment procedures and institutional responsibilities. Teachers need to understand the professional expectations associated with each career stage and the training opportunities available to meet them.

Finally, professional development arrangements must respond to contemporary educational needs. Subject knowledge, instructional methodology, inclusive teaching, classroom management, assessment and digital competence should feature prominently in continuing professional

development programmes. Technology-enabled training can also expand access for teachers in rural and underserved areas, particularly where geographical distance and limited resources restrict participation.

These considerations demonstrate that teacher development requires a coordinated approach involving government, TRCN, teacher education institutions, school administrators, teacher unions and practising teachers. Regulatory standards, professional training, recruitment and welfare policies must operate together if the teaching profession is to attract, develop and retain competent personnel.

Conclusion

Nigeria has established a legal and policy foundation for regulating teacher education and professional certification. The Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria Act No. 31 of 1993 assigns the Council responsibility for determining professional standards, registering qualified teachers and regulating teaching practice. The National Policy on Education complements this framework by prescribing minimum academic qualifications, while the Professional Qualifying Examination provides an additional mechanism for assessing professional readiness. The September 2025 directive linking examination-centre accreditation to TRCN certification further demonstrates government's intention to strengthen compliance. However, the effectiveness of these provisions is constrained by significant implementation difficulties. Teacher shortages, inadequate recruitment, attrition, uneven distribution of qualified personnel and weak certification enforcement continue to affect the education system. The estimated shortage of 278,000 teachers at basic education levels and the reported teacher-pupil ratio of approximately 1:35 illustrate the scale of the workforce challenge. Low remuneration, inadequate professional support and international migration further reduce the capacity of the system to retain experienced teachers.

Professional development presents another major concern. Many teachers lack regular access to training that addresses changes in subject knowledge, instructional methods and digital technologies. Although the 2020 TRCN Career Path Policy provides a framework for competency-based progression, its implementation requires clearer institutional arrangements, assessment procedures and financial support. The central issue, therefore, is not simply the absence of legal provisions but the gap between regulatory intentions and practical implementation. Strengthening teacher quality requires a coordinated policy response that combines effective regulation with adequate recruitment, improved welfare, accessible certification pathways and sustained professional development. Without these measures, the legal framework will remain limited in its capacity to improve teaching standards and educational outcomes. Nigeria's commitment to educational transformation must consequently be demonstrated through consistent investment in teachers, stronger institutional accountability and practical arrangements that support professional growth throughout the teaching career.

Recommendations

Based on the issues examined, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthening TRCN's regulatory capacity: The Federal Government should provide TRCN with adequate financial, human and technological resources to discharge its statutory responsibilities. The Council requires sufficient personnel to conduct inspections, verify teachers' certification status and enforce professional standards. A comprehensive digital database should be maintained to monitor registration, certificate renewal and continuing professional development records. Regulatory provisions should be applied consistently to individuals and institutions that fail to comply.
2. Addressing the national teacher shortage: Federal and state governments should develop coordinated recruitment programmes to reduce the estimated shortage of teachers at basic education levels. Recruitment should be transparent, merit-based and guided by reliable workforce data. Particular attention should be given to rural communities and areas affected by insecurity, where shortages are more severe. State governments should also strengthen workforce planning to ensure that recruitment keeps pace with enrolment and staff attrition.
3. Improving teachers' remuneration and welfare: Competitive salary structures and appropriate welfare packages should be introduced to improve teacher retention. Government should ensure timely salary payments and consider additional support for teachers serving in rural and underserved communities, including housing and transportation assistance. Clear career progression arrangements and meaningful professional advancement opportunities should also be provided to strengthen teachers' motivation and commitment.
4. Expanding accessible certification programmes: Professional certification pathways available to serving teachers should be strengthened through affordable and flexible training arrangements. Bridging programmes should accommodate eligible teachers who require additional professional preparation. However, these programmes should be subjected to appropriate quality assurance to ensure that shortened training periods do not compromise pedagogical standards. Subsidised access and flexible delivery arrangements should be considered for practising teachers.
5. Establishing a comprehensive continuing professional development framework: TRCN, in collaboration with state ministries of education and teacher education institutions, should develop a coordinated framework for continuous professional development. Participation in relevant professional learning activities should be linked to certification renewal and career progression. Training should address subject knowledge, instructional methods, classroom management, assessment, inclusive education and digital competence.
6. Strengthening induction and mentorship programmes: Newly qualified teachers should receive structured induction and supervised professional support before being assigned full instructional responsibilities. Experienced teachers should be encouraged to mentor beginning teachers through organised school-based programmes. These arrangements would assist new entrants in translating theoretical knowledge into effective classroom practice and reduce the difficulties associated with the transition into teaching.

7. Implementing the TRCN Career Path Policy: State governments and relevant education authorities should translate the 2020 Career Path Policy into operational structures with clearly defined professional competencies, assessment procedures and advancement requirements. Promotion should increasingly reflect demonstrated professional competence, performance and participation in development activities rather than seniority alone. Transparent assessment mechanisms and appropriate financial incentives should accompany implementation.
8. Expanding technology-enabled professional development: Professional development programmes should make greater use of digital platforms to reach teachers who cannot easily participate in face-to-face training. Online courses, virtual workshops and digital learning resources can improve access, particularly for teachers in rural and underserved areas. Training should focus not only on operating digital tools but also on integrating them effectively into teaching, learning and assessment.
9. Promoting stakeholder participation and policy accountability: Government and TRCN should maintain regular consultation with teacher unions, teacher education institutions, school administrators and practising teachers when developing and implementing professional policies. Their involvement can improve the relevance and acceptability of regulatory decisions. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should also be established to assess progress, identify implementation challenges and guide necessary policy adjustments.
10. Increasing and improving education funding: Federal and state governments should give greater priority to education financing, particularly teacher recruitment, retention and professional development. Available grants and designated education funds should be accessed and utilised effectively. Funding decisions should be guided by identified workforce needs and measurable professional development priorities. Sustained financial commitment is necessary to ensure that teacher education and certification policies produce practical improvements in professional standards.

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