

In The Matter Of:

*DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
CHARTER AUTHORIZING PANEL*

January 19, 2021

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ARKANSAS DIVISION OF
ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

CHARTER AUTHORIZING PANEL

JANUARY 19, 2021
9:00 a.m.

A P P E A R A N C E S

PANEL MEMBERS:

MS. DEBORAH COFFMAN	Chairperson/DESE Asst. Commissioner - Public School Accountability
MS. TOYCE NEWTON	Former State Board of Ed. Member
DR. NACCAMAN WILLIAMS	Former State Board of Ed. Member
MR. PHIL BALDWIN	CEO, Citizens Bank
MS. SONJA WRIGHT-McMURRAY	Division of Career & Technical Education - Associate Director for Career Readiness

ADE LEGAL COUNSEL:

MS. MARY CLAIRE HYATT DESE Attorney

ALSO APPEARING:

MS. TRACY WEBB DESE Coordinator of Monitoring
and Systems Support

LOCATION:

ARKANSAS DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
- Auditorium
#4 Capitol Mall
Little Rock, Arkansas

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Good morning, everyone. The January 19, 2021 meeting of the Charter Authorizing Panel is called to order. I'd like to say hello to everyone this morning and thank you for being here.

CONSENT AGENDA

CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Panel Members, we have two items on the Consent Agenda, if you'll take a moment to look at those. We have our panel minutes from December 15th and December 16th, and also Consideration of the 2021 Charter Application Forms and Timeline. If you'll look those over, and if you have any discussion or if you're ready for a motion --

MR. BALDWIN: I'll move approval of both the minutes and the proposed application timeline.

MS. NEWTON: Second.

CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: We have a motion by Mr. Baldwin and a second by Ms. Newton to approve the Consent Agenda.

Any discussion?

All those in favor?

(UNANIMOUS CHORUS OF AYES)

CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: It passes unanimously.

ACTION AGENDA

1 1. CONSIDERATION OF CHARTER AMENDMENT REQUEST - RIVER VALLEY
2 VIRTUAL ACADEMY (VAN BUREN SCHOOL DISTRICT)

3 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Action Agenda Item 1, Ms.
4 Webb.

5 MS. WEBB: Good morning. The River Valley
6 Virtual Academy is a district conversion charter
7 school in the Van Buren School District. The charter
8 was approved in 2016 and serves students in grades K-
9 12. The district is requesting an amendment to
10 relocate the existing campus.

11 Today we have Jennifer Feeny, the School
12 Coordinator, Nancy Robbins, Director of Elementary
13 Curriculum, and I believe the Superintendent, Dr.
14 Harold Jeffcoat is also on the Zoom.

15 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Good morning to you. If you
16 will raise your right hand -- do you swear or affirm
17 that the testimony you're about to give shall be the
18 truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

19 (ALL SPEAKERS ANSWERED AFFIRMATIVELY)

20 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Dr. Jeffcoat, you've got 20
21 minutes. I don't expect it'll take 20, but if you'd
22 like to introduce your plan of action.

23 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: Yes, ma'am. I appreciate you
24 having us this morning, and I hope it doesn't take 20
25 minutes. We are simply requesting permission to

1 relocate our virtual academy. When we started our
2 virtual academy we started in our freshmen academy,
3 so it's -- we had a section, an area, towards the end
4 of our building that was available for use and a
5 couple of classrooms, and so we made that space part
6 of our virtual academy. That's where we were housed
7 and we are currently housed.

8 About two years ago, we purchased a local gym/
9 cardio studio, a nice, beautiful facility, a little
10 over 10,000 square feet. And we converted that space
11 to become a professional development center, but we
12 also allocated a large section of that space to the
13 west. We did that for our virtual academy. We knew
14 that we were going to be expanding and we knew that
15 we would grow in numbers, and that in fact has
16 happened and -- as most schools have grown in their
17 virtual academies this year. And so we are now
18 looking at making that transition where we move our
19 virtual academy to our new location.

20 I have Jennifer Feeny with us this morning. She
21 is our Coordinator for the virtual academy and does a
22 phenomenal job building that program and insuring
23 that our students that are enrolled in our virtual
24 academy are provided the very best education. She
25 does a great job. As you can see, if you look at our

1 accountability report, we've had a letter grade of an
2 A each year that we've been open. She just does a
3 phenomenal job. I believe this last semester, even
4 with the huge increase in numbers, we still had a 93%
5 success rate, which is phenomenal, and I appreciate
6 her very much for what she's done.

7 Nancy Robbins is our Curriculum Director. She's
8 been very instrumental in building the program from
9 the ground up and helping us get to where we are
10 today.

11 But our program has been very successful, it has
12 grown. We have a large number -- as you can see, a
13 large number of students that are enrolled. And
14 having our location -- having the ability to relocate
15 to this new location will just allow us to better
16 meet the needs of our students.

17 Jennifer, Nancy, anything that you'd like to
18 add?

19 MS. FEENY: I don't think I have any.

20 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: Okay.

21 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: All right. We'll hear from
22 Ms. Hyatt. Do you have any questions? No concerns
23 or questions?

24 All right. Panel Members, let's start with you.

25 Dr. Williams?

1 DR. WILLIAMS: Sorry, I was on mute.

2 Just a quick question for you. This is -- you
3 know, this makes perfect sense to me. I really don't
4 have -- how many students are you all currently
5 serving? And how many will this allow you to serve?

6 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: So initially we had -- we had
7 permission to serve 325 students, and then we started
8 this school year meeting with the State Board and
9 received approval to go up to 1,000 students. We
10 started the school year with around 600 students
11 enrolled; we're now down to about -- close to 500.
12 Just under 500 students are currently enrolled.

13 And, Jennifer, you may have an exact number
14 today.

15 Many of the students have transitioned back to
16 onsite learning, but we still have a very large
17 number of students enrolled.

18 Jennifer, do you know the number?

19 MS. FEENY: Currently, I think we're about 430.
20 It varies every day.

21 DR. WILLIAMS: Okay. Uh-huh. I was just
22 wondering about the trend. You know, my kid -- well,
23 my kid -- my grandkid, my grandson is in Springdale
24 Schools, and they're kind of -- their fall semester,
25 a lot more students that were virtual, and this

1 semester they picked up quite a few that's going
2 back. And then, as you've said, it's fluctuating
3 pretty much. Uh-huh, okay. Thank you.

4 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Mr. Baldwin, any questions?

5 MR. BALDWIN: I have no questions.

6 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Ms. Newton?

7 MS. NEWTON: I guess that's my ignorance in all
8 things technology-related, first of all. How -- I'd
9 like to know -- I don't have any questions specific
10 to the design, but how do you calculate square
11 footage for virtual as opposed to the onsite? See,
12 that's a little bit confusing for me since they are
13 virtual. It seems like a big shift, the students --
14 the number of students going virtual. Certainly, I
15 understand the need. But what's the shift based on
16 how -- are calculations done by space?

17 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: Yes, ma'am. And that's a great
18 question. As all of you know, we do have
19 requirements, program requirements for space for
20 onsite learning if we build a new building -- and we
21 just finished building an elementary school; we were
22 required to have 850 square feet for each classroom,
23 and that was based on the number of students that
24 could be in those classrooms, how much space each
25 student would need. In a virtual academy, in a

1 virtual environment, you're not really on a daily
2 basis pressed for space. But there are times
3 throughout the year where students will come to the
4 campus and work, and that varies based on the
5 students' motivation and interests. As long as
6 students are progressing well and are successful,
7 then there's very little need for them to be onsite.
8 But when we had testing -- we have state testing
9 that's coming up. Right now we're working on our
10 plans for how we're going to administer the state
11 test and put 430 kids -- and so it's -- space will be
12 an issue. And we are -- we're going to be fine. We
13 actually had originally planned to utilize some of
14 the space at this location's professional development
15 center anyway to meet the needs of those kids.

16 But, Ms. Newton, you're right, it is a little
17 bit confusing for virtual, what the needs really are
18 across the state, especially with all the schools
19 taking on -- taking different approaches to meeting
20 the needs of students virtually. But in our program
21 we have -- we do have times when students will come
22 onsite and this space -- it is large enough. Since
23 it is also a professional development center we have
24 three large rooms where we provide training for
25 teachers, where those can be dual purpose rooms. So

1 when we need to use those spaces for our virtual
2 academy students, we'll just cancel any programming
3 that we have for teachers and that space will be
4 available to us. But the majority of the time we
5 won't need all the space that we have, but when we do
6 run into those critical times this larger space will
7 easily accommodate our needs.

8 MS. NEWTON: That answers -- that answered my
9 question. Thank you.

10 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: Thank you.

11 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Ms. Wright-McMurray?

12 MS. WRIGHT-McMURRAY: No, I don't have any
13 questions at this time.

14 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Dr. Jeffcoat, my question was
15 related to page 2 of your application, your amendment
16 request. On the budget projection, it said in here
17 the budget for K-8 students is \$449 per student and
18 \$4,500 per student in grades 9-12. Can you kind of
19 talk us through that?

20 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: Yes, ma'am, I sure can. I kind
21 of touched on that a little bit, just in the last
22 question. A lot of schools have taken a lot of
23 different approaches to meeting the needs of their
24 students in a virtual environment. And in years
25 past, we actually purchased a program; it's a Pearson

1 program, and that was -- it was very expensive, but
2 it was also very high-quality. It really met the
3 needs for our students. It provided some great
4 learning opportunities for our kids, completely in
5 line with the state model, and very much connection
6 -- connected to another charter that you're familiar
7 with, which is Arkansas Connections Academy. Ours --
8 our program, that's how much it would cost for all of
9 our students to enroll in this, in this program. So
10 we look a little bit different in our elementary
11 school versus our high school. So in elementary
12 school we -- our program is designed in a way where
13 we're able to purchase online curriculum at a cheaper
14 rate, but we also have dedicated personnel who are
15 monitoring the success of our students, monitoring
16 the progress of our students, and providing
17 instruction for our students in different content
18 areas. So when we have so many resources set aside
19 to take care of our kids in personnel to take care of
20 our elementary kids, we don't need as much detailed
21 programming virtually, if that makes sense. But in
22 secondary, you're looking at specialized content
23 areas; you've got chemistry -- I mean you -- the
24 biology, all of these really specialized fields. And
25 we did not want to try to create a virtual academy

1 where we were making our teachers do two jobs per se,
2 where our onsite campus teachers who are specialists
3 in their field providing instruction for onsite
4 learning and also doing that for the students that
5 are virtual. So we did -- we do spend a lot more
6 money in secondary and those credit-bearing classes,
7 but it is excellent programming. So a teacher -- or
8 a student in high school, that's in a chemistry
9 class, they receive instruction from our Pearson
10 provider. So they have a teacher that's providing
11 instruction, the Pearson provider. They have an
12 opportunity to reach out to the tutor, which is a
13 different person that's available that we pay for,
14 that's separate. And then, in addition to that, we
15 also in our district have personnel that is
16 monitoring the success of those students and then
17 providing interventions and support when needed.

18 So you can see that we have a little bit more --
19 we have a little bit more invested in secondary in
20 terms of the programming, but the quality of
21 education is the same; it's just how we structured
22 our programming from elementary school to secondary
23 school. And all the things that we put in place you
24 can see, as I mentioned earlier, a 93% success rate.
25 You do get what you pay for, and I believe that. And

1 while it is -- it does cost us a lot more money for
2 our secondary students to receive the education that
3 they're receiving, it's well worth it. Our students
4 in our secondary program have a lot of opportunities,
5 many more than what we have at our onsite -- for
6 onsite learning. So it's -- with virtual there's --
7 the sky's the limit with what you can do with
8 virtual. And I'm a huge fan, which is why we have a
9 charter for our virtual academy. But I think that
10 you can't go into it with the idea that you're going
11 to try to -- that you're going to make it so
12 efficient that you're not spending much money. If
13 you want to have a good program, if you want to make
14 sure you have a high success rate, and you want to be
15 bragged about in the state, then you invest in that
16 programming. That's what we're doing.

17 Anything else, Jennifer or Nancy, that you'd
18 like to add to that question?

19 MS. ROBBINS: Well, I do think the biggest
20 difference is staffing, and we had staff available to
21 do that teaching in a virtual school and that's all
22 they do. And so they were existing staff, and with
23 our numbers being down we had enough staff to
24 actually be able to handle the K-8 model. And so
25 that's one reason why you see this huge discrepancy

1 in cost. We weren't purchasing a Pearson teacher to
2 deliver instruction, so our K-8 program is handled by
3 our in-district teachers but that is their only
4 responsibility. They're not also teaching every day
5 onsite; so they are onsite working but they're not
6 teaching onsite students, they're only teaching
7 virtual students. So we had that ability this year
8 to be able to handle that, and so that's one reason
9 you see that huge discrepancy.

10 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Thanks for clarifying that.
11 Because I don't want the general public or people
12 considering digital learning models to look at that
13 and think, wow, that's a cheap way to go, let's all
14 do that -- because there's a whole lot that goes into
15 that that's not stated in those three sentences
16 there. Thank you so much for that.

17 Any other questions or comments?

18 MS. NEWTON: I have a question or comment, or a
19 combination.

20 Given that the intent of charters is to, I
21 guess, develop best practices and be able to share
22 them throughout the state, it certainly seems like
23 this is a promising and better way to address. Is
24 there a protocol, Ms. Coffman, for sharing
25 information about the success of not only this

1 program but other programs that seem to be moving in
2 a direction of meeting -- better meeting young
3 people's needs? I have, you know, knowledge for my
4 area, and I'm sure that multiplies out over the
5 state, of students that are consistently struggling
6 with this new learning model based on what's going
7 on. And the other side of it is if there's a better
8 mousetrap then it seems that it should be aggressive
9 -- aggressively promoted. And I don't know if that's
10 a rivalry between schools or -- you know, I don't
11 want to know what this school is doing. But I don't
12 know that the state doesn't have an obligation --
13 maybe not an obligation but have an opportunity to be
14 able to share, because it does seem to be a program
15 that's meeting, and has been -- not just now, but
16 over the past. But I -- what I'm impressed by is the
17 way it's transitioned into an unusual environment and
18 doesn't seem to be any hiccup. So that's just for
19 what it's worth.

20 I know other charter programs that we talk
21 about, or virtual, are facing a number of challenges
22 that could be maybe diminished by, you know, some
23 type of sharing.

24 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Ms. Newton, Dr. Jeffcoat has
25 been serving on our Superintendent Advisory Committee

1 as we have been working on our digital learning
2 application, our Act 1240 waiver that went before the
3 State Board last week that's going to give
4 opportunities similar to what he has done through a
5 district conversion charter, an opportunity for a
6 school to have a program within their LEA. So we'll
7 see how that rolls out over the next few months. But
8 it was through conversations with superintendents,
9 like Dr. Jeffcoat, that helped us to design that
10 opportunity for school districts for the future.

11 So I also assume -- and, Dr. Jeffcoat, you can
12 speak to this -- I'm assuming that other
13 superintendents are reaching out to you and/or your
14 team?

15 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: Yes, ma'am.

16 And, Ms. Newton, you're exactly right; we've got
17 a great program and it's very successful and we want
18 people to know about it because we want all schools
19 to have an opportunity to have the same success that
20 we have. Now we had a unique situation where we were
21 very interested in this model before this model was
22 needed, and so we've done a lot of work. I will tell
23 you we're not perfect and we still -- we are making
24 changes to our program frequently; we make
25 adjustments, tweaks, but we do feel like we have a

1 very solid system in place. We have shared our model
2 with many schools. We are -- we do get contacted.
3 And tomorrow morning our team here we will be
4 visiting with Wilbur D. Mills Co-op superintendents,
5 and that's the Cabot, Searcy, Beebe, all in that area
6 of the state. We'll be Zooming with them and sharing
7 what we do in our district so that maybe it will help
8 them, help spur some ideas and stir some ideas. And
9 what we want is not only to share what we're doing,
10 but we also want to hear what other schools are
11 doing, because this is -- while we all thought
12 initially that this virtual model, especially during
13 this pandemic, would quickly transition and go away
14 and everyone would come back to school, I really
15 don't believe that that's going to be the case. I
16 think what has happened is those families that have
17 tried virtual they realize the benefits of a virtual
18 model. And while they may have never thought about
19 it before, they're seeing that this is a model that
20 really aligns with the needs of their family and
21 whatever their situations are. And so I think that
22 now that people have tried this virtual model, this
23 concept, I think that it's just going to continue to
24 grow or at least be stable at a pretty close level of
25 what it is today. So it's vitally important that we

1 share the great things that are happening in our
2 district. But then all of those districts that are
3 -- that have created very successful virtual models
4 that they share their ideas and concepts as well,
5 because we want to be -- we want to be a state that
6 is known for quality education and we can only get
7 there by working together.

8 MS. NEWTON: I for one am looking to the day of
9 the state -- the testing, and some decisions may be
10 driven by that. But I've always wanted to say this:
11 I'm waiting with bated breath to see, you know, if,
12 you know -- if this is actually something -- or other
13 interventions that might be successful in -- because
14 I think when we get the results of state tests in
15 light of what's going on it's going to be helter-
16 skelter in a sense of terms of trying to just
17 determine how we address what we're likely to maybe
18 see. And I might be surprised, but I don't know.
19 But just those approaches and best practices, I think
20 that we have an obligation to embrace and promote.

21 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: I agree.

22 DR. WILLIAMS: Madam Chair?

23 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Yes, Dr. Williams, go ahead.

24 DR. WILLIAMS: I was just noticing on your
25 accountability sheet that there wasn't a lot of

1 diversity reflected, given that there are -- certain
2 scores were not listed, but just what -- we all
3 understand the reason for that. Is this reflective
4 -- are the demographics reflective of the school
5 itself?

6 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: Yes, sir.

7 DR. WILLIAMS: Of the school district, okay.

8 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: Yes, sir. It's almost spot-on
9 for our demographics in our district.

10 DR. WILLIAMS: Okay. Thank you.

11 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: And I want to say this too, we
12 -- I know we've talked a little bit about our program
13 and we're only going to brag about the good things.
14 We've had some struggles. But it does take -- it
15 does take a commitment from these two individuals
16 that are here on our screen, that's part of my team
17 -- Nancy Robbins, Jennifer Feeny. They have been
18 phenomenal at really developing this program and
19 taking the time to make it great. Ms. Feeny has had
20 -- you know, we're a virtual academy, but if I look
21 at all of my building principals, every one -- and I
22 ask each one of them how many home visits have you
23 done in this last month, I can tell you Ms. Feeny has
24 done more home visits than any principal that I have.
25 And you wouldn't think that with it being a virtual

1 academy, but when there are students that are not on
2 task, not on track for success, she has just done a
3 phenomenal job of getting out there, getting after
4 those kids, and helping those families get the
5 resources they need to be successful. So it takes --
6 you can have a great idea, a good concept and good
7 model, but if you don't have the people to make it a
8 success then it's not going to go anywhere. And I
9 just appreciate these two individuals; they've been
10 phenomenal building our program. And I get to go out
11 and celebrate and share the great things that we're
12 doing, but it's -- it's the people, not the programs.
13 It's always the people.

14 DR. WILLIAMS: How do you all think you all are
15 doing? I notice you all had a letter grade, an ESSA
16 Index score of an A, which is outstanding, you know.
17 What are you all projecting for this year? This is a
18 Covid year; you know, things are not perfect this
19 year. Any thoughts on how you -- what your
20 expectations are from an ESSA Index perspective?

21 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: Well, I'm going to let Ms.
22 Feeny speak to that because she knows our kids and
23 she knows our program, she knows where we are today.

24 So, Ms. Feeny, what are your thoughts on where
25 we are with performance today?

1 MS. FEENY: So over the last three years, our
2 performance on the ESSA report card has really
3 aligned with our course completion rate. And so last
4 year I believe we were about 98% pass rate on all of
5 our courses K-12. First semester, we're really
6 excited to be at 93% with the large number of kids
7 that we had enrolled. And so if that continues, if
8 that trend continues for us, then we are hoping and,
9 you know, we truly believe that we'll probably be
10 pretty successful again this year because the last
11 three years, it's almost directly aligned. Our
12 course pass rate and our ESSA has directly aligned.
13 So we believe we're still going in that trend, and I
14 guess time will tell, in the spring, how that goes
15 for us. But our students are completing their work
16 and, you know, that's been key to our kids being
17 successful is to be successful in their courses. And
18 if they're not completing their work, you know,
19 they're not getting the education they need.

20 So we do believe we're on track. There's a lot
21 of kids, so we'll just have to see how it works out
22 and hopeful they all come onsite to do their testing.

23 DR. WILLIAMS: Okay. Thank you. Good answer.
24 Uh-huh.

25 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Any other questions or

1 comments from the Panel?

2 I'm ready for a motion when you're ready.

3 DR. WILLIAMS: I move that the amendment request
4 be approved.

5 MS. NEWTON: Second.

6 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: So a motion by Dr. Williams
7 and a second by Ms. Newton to approve the amendment
8 request.

9 Any discussion?

10 All those in favor?

11 (UNANIMOUS CHORUS OF AYES)

12 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Motion passes.

13 Ms. Webb, do we need to go in and fill out our
14 voting sheet?

15 MS. WEBB: (inaudible, not at microphone)

16 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Okay. If you'll check your
17 email, Panel Members, you should have a voting sheet.

18 [A FEW MOMENTS OF SILENCE]

19 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Mr. Baldwin, if you'd like to
20 read your comment, please.

21 MR. BALDWIN: Yes, thank you. I voted to
22 support the request. Obviously, this is an excellent
23 program. I commend everybody involved in the program
24 for doing such a great job for the kids. And I think
25 the additional space is needed, as you all have

1 stated.

2 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Thank you.

3 Ms. Newton.

4 MS. NEWTON: Okay. I did -- the request
5 addresses the need based on an increase of enrollment
6 and teaching supports.

7 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Thank you.

8 Dr. Williams.

9 DR. WILLIAMS: I support the motion. The
10 additional space is needed due to an increase in
11 enrollment. Also, there are no academic concerns.

12 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Thank you.

13 Ms. Wright-McMurray.

14 MS. WRIGHT-McMURRAY: I vote -- River Valley has
15 a proven track record of providing a quality virtual
16 education for their students. This model can serve
17 as a best practice for other schools as they are
18 addressing their virtual needs during the pandemic.

19 CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: All right. Well,
20 congratulations, Dr. Jeffcoat. And we look forward
21 to hearing more about your program and more success
22 for your students.

23 SUPT. JEFFCOAT: Thanks. Thank you all very
24 much. We appreciate your time this morning and
25 appreciate your commitment to the field of education.

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Thank you.

CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Thank you.

DR. WILLIAMS: Thank you. Uh-huh.

CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: Panel Members, unless you have additional business, we have no other business and therefore I'll accept a motion to adjourn.

DR. WILLIAMS: So moved.

MR. BALDWIN: Second.

CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: All right. All those in favor?

(UNANIMOUS CHORUS OF AYES)

CHAIRMAN COFFMAN: All right. Have a great day. Thank you for today.

(The meeting was concluded at 9:29 a.m.)

	15:25	16:12	5:4,22;6:8;8:20,21; 19:21;20:10	11:13
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