

Made in Greece: PALSO Federation and foreign language education in Greece

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For over 50 years the private language school system in Greece, commonly known by the Greek name 'frontisterion', has pioneered the development of language studies making Greece one of the publishing market leaders in continental Europe in books and documents published in English. Stimulated by the demand for international trade, the 'frontisteria' arose to meet the need of families wishing to take advantage of the international trade opportunities in English speaking countries following the end of World War II. This paper explores the origins and history of private language tutoring schools in Greece and explains the pedagogic and examination principles behind them. It also addresses the development and importance of the testing system adopted in the private tutorial schools and the development of an association to ensure quality teaching and testing of language proficiency, particularly for English language. In doing so, it examines the process of development of a teaching syllabus, teacher training and examination system which has influenced both Greek state and private language education.

KEYWORDS: *frontisterion, private schools, UCLES, language associations, language exams, TEFL, CEFR, Waystage, threshold*



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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Why private tutorial schools evolved

Privately owned language tutoring schools have answered a perceived need in Greece for foreign language education for over 50 years. Middle-class parents looked at the elites of the country, educated in private schools and sent abroad for university degrees. They see that if their children can speak two or more languages, they, likewise, can navigate the international waters, attend foreign universities, and establish the friendships and contacts that lead to jobs and trade.

The outward gaze is not new to Greece, a trading country since antiquity, with outposts across the Mediterranean basin and excursions as far as India in the days of Alexander the Great. The Byzantine Empire at one time stretched from Rome to eastern Anatolia. When the Ottoman Turks invaded the region, the Hellenes' glorious history was subsumed in the Sultan's bureaucracy. The Aghia Sofia church was turned into a mosque. Greeks adapted and survived 400 years of Ottoman rule. What remnants of their language and culture were intact were largely preserved in 'secret schools'

taught by Orthodox priests. It's tempting to suggest that the seed of the modern tutoring school sprang from those clandestine classrooms, a solution to a problem, a 'work-around'.

The Ottoman Empire began to unravel as Enlightenment thought rose elsewhere. In the coincidence of outside weakness and internal democratic fervour, Greeks rose up in revolt in hopes of carving out a modern Greek state. They succeeded in 1820-21, putting in place the then popular parliamentary monarchy form of government and a line of Bavarian royalty. Foreshadowing later events, the new state was in debt from the start.

Leaders of the revolution chose sides, aligning with one or another of four 'Great Powers' (England, France, Germany, and Russia), intrigues which ended at least once in assassination (Kapodistrias). Private fortunes were amassed. Malarial swamps went undrained. And then there was another war. And another.

Impoverished by 150 years of wars and civil war, Greece emerged from WWII with a largely uneducated peasant populace to whom large estates were distributed as small holdings. Increasing numbers of heirs to these original homesteads meant the land couldn't support all. Second sons and daughters moved into urban centres for education and work. A girl's dowry

'The limited seats at Greek universities were concentrated in classical studies and those professions seen as needed in the modern state'

now changed from a hope-chest and a couple of fields to her lifetime ability to use her education to help build family income. Education was seen as a valuable commodity. Following WWII, Greece was one of many countries that received the benefits of the Marshall Plan (USA). However, a disproportionate amount of aid went to private education, on the premise that the country needed to rebuild its leadership class. These new leaders would then, in turn, enable rest of the people to prosper. Or so it was hoped.

1.2 The rise of tutoring schools – answering a specific need

Until now, the Greek Constitution has specified that education would be in the hands of the Greek people. Free public schools (1-12) were the route for most children. Private schools existed, but were only recognised for public service jobs or entry to Greek universities, if they were headquartered in Greece and licensed by the Greek Ministry of Education. The method of education was heavily influenced by the Germanic model, a result of the Bavarian royalty and, so, depended heavily on rote learning and memorisation.

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All universities were state run and, likewise, were free, but seats were limited and attained by passing entrance tests with the highest scores. Sufficient scores were calculated to fill the seats available in each school. To assure one’s place in the field of one’s choice at university, students became increasingly competitive. This in turn led to the rise of outside, private tutoring schools for the three desmes (tracks) that led to pure sciences, health and human sciences or humanities. These pre-university tutoring schools presaged the concept of foreign language specialty tutoring.

The limited seats at Greek universities were concentrated on classical studies and those professions seen as needed in the modern state. Foreign languages did not, in the early years, receive great attention. Yet as European integration took hold and parents saw what their children would need to succeed in life, language certification began to increase in demand. The universities, however, could not turn out

teachers fast enough. Compounding the sheer limitation of places available was the situation that many graduates had never travelled outside the country and had not had the opportunity to use in native speaker environments the language they were teaching. Foreign language proficiency depended on ‘book learning.’

So, state-certified, university-educated teachers were too few and foreign language teaching in Greek public schools was qualitatively deficient. For several decades, the shortfall in degree-holding teachers was made up by those holding proficiency certificates from a foreign language certification body, notably the Cambridge Language Examinations Syndicate.

While the majority of Greek parents could not afford to send their children to a full-day private school, most could afford a couple of hours a week in a language centre. Demand, then, created the original market for private language school education. Member centres of what would become the PALSO organisation encouraged every child in their catchment area to join, keeping their prices at reasonable levels for their neighbourhood. The owner of a tutoring school was not required to be a certified teacher, as long as those who did the teaching were certified. Small schools opened; a few larger chains and franchise operations came onto the market. The march forward began, with enrolment growing to

a million students in Greece at its peak and currently numbering some 800,000 enrolled in over 4000 member and non-member tutoring schools.

1.3 The development of language school associations

In 1957, a group of tutoring school owners in Athens formed an association, the Pan-Athenian Language School Organisation (PALSO). Their initial goal was to promote the concept and, of course, enrolment in their schools, to share information on best practices and to influence legislation that might affect their business.

One of the early challenges was meeting the need for qualified foreign language teachers. The Ministry of Education sought an interim solution, namely awarding teaching certificates to Greek high school graduates who had also passed a recognised foreign language proficiency test. The University of Cambridge Language Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) was the premier test salon in the UK and an obvious first choice. However, there were also, at that time, English tests put out by the University of Oxford, as well as a few other creditable tests of British or American English. With the backing of tutoring school owners, the Ministry decided to award tutoring licences to holders of the University of Cambridge or University of Michigan proficiency certificates. These certificate holders, however, could not teach

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in the public schools. That position was still reserved for university graduates.

1.4 Foreign language proficiency certificates as a market force

The extension of teaching permission was meant to cover the need until Greek universities could ramp up their foreign language teaching programmes. The unintended result of the decision was the rise in demand for these two foreign-source examinations (and the progress tests that led up to them) to the detriment of other tests in the market. Teaching in a tutoring school, in those early years, became a very decent ‘entry-level job with prospects’ for those who either did not get into university or who wanted to enter the work force as soon as possible after high school. Tutoring schools now began to advertise their test success rates and to shift toward course books and other materials geared to success in Cambridge or Michigan tests.

Teaching permits were also granted to graduates of foreign, English-speaking universities. From 1976 to 2006, ‘teaching English in Greece’ was an attractive way for British, American, Canadian,

Australian, and South African native speakers to work abroad and see a bit of the world. In that pre-Internet era, several recruiting organisations sprang up, advertising in those source countries and assisting prospective teachers in making the move and getting their ‘paperwork’ together. At the same time, Greek students who had gone to universities abroad could receive a language teaching permit.

A fair number of Greek young people did go abroad to study. For some, it was an alternative to not scoring high enough to enter a field of their choice at a Greek university. This should not be construed to mean those who studied abroad were less intelligent or qualified. Many were, in fact, high achievers, just not good memorisers or test takers. Others did their bachelor-degree work in Greece and went abroad for graduate studies. These foreign-educated graduates could supplement their work in their field by offering foreign language lessons (Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 2012).

2. FROM ASSOCIATION TO FEDERATION

2.1 The growth of syndicalisation

As tutoring schools sprang up across the country, syndicalisation blossomed. A lot of local associations had been founded by 1980 and had banded together into the Pan-Hellenic Federation of Foreign Language School Owners, a non-profit association under Greek law. (*School* was changed

to *Centre* in 1999 as horizons widened to include adult education.) The original impetus was extended to include more quality assurance support as well as a retirement fund for member owners in 1989. At the time, many professional groups maintained retirement funds separate from the state fund.

2.2 Federation today

Today, the PALSO Federation represents over 3000 member schools in Greece, organised into 41 local associations. The Federation is governed by a 15-member board, with 114 representatives arising from the associations. The Federation maintains a central headquarters in Athens for administration and support to regional associations. In addition, there is a legal advisor and a tax advisor, as well as other educational support as needed by members. The PALSO LAAS examinations are currently set in more than 100 Examination Centres in Greece and Cyprus, holding and applying the ELOT EN ISO 9001:2008 of EQA HELLAS A.E.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF EXAMINATIONS

3.1 The PALSO Examinations

To mount such an ambitious plan meant maintenance of an office for each regional association and the Federation as well. There were rent, utilities, supplies and staff to pay. An income source had to be developed, and one obvious solution was to mount a test of English and collect

registration fees from students who would be encouraged to sit for it. The PALSΟ Examinations were first presented in 1981 and with regard given to their suitability for the young Greek candidate population.

The PALSΟ Examinations comprised four levels A1 to B2. The aim was to ensure the calibration of language ability and the validity of exams to verify that abilities were being tested in the academic arena, although they had not yet involved all testing bodies.

Printed in a write-in booklet of some 4 to 6 pages, on colour-coded paper, the PALSΟ Elementary (pink), Basic (blue), Standard (yellow) and Higher (white) were administered in state school premises, rented for the occasion on Saturdays and Sundays across the country.

The weekend test was a norm in Greece for other testing organisations as well. Growing participation – at one time, the highest among Cambridge test takers – meant public schools had to be used for the written papers and these were only free at the weekend. In other countries, with smaller enrolments, other smaller facilities could be used on weekdays.

As most tests had two sittings, PALSΟ did, too. First was Winter, initially in late January or early February and second was in spring, in late May or

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early June. Taken at centres around the country, the tests were sent back to Athens, where they were processed and hand-marked over three four-hour shifts by 20 teacher-examiners. Initially, examiners were all native speakers; in 1989, the first highly proficient native Greek speaker was hired (ABD American English for ‘All but Dissertation’, i.e. a student who has attained the MA or MS degree and completed additional coursework and research required for the doctoral but whose dissertation in applied linguistics has not yet been submitted and approved).

Discrete multiple-choice questions were scored by marking correct choices through holes punched in transparent plastic templates, one template for each page. Multiple-matching and gap-filling responses were compared to a print-out key. Short essays were less rigidly rated, based on fulfilment of expected content and production of correct usage.

To standardise the approach among examiners, a few at a time were called in to meetings with the supervisor to discuss and rate samples, at least

once during the marking process.

Listening and speaking skills in the mid-1980s were just beginning to receive more attention from educators and publishers. The early PALSO tests had no speaking component. Listening scripts, eliciting multiple-choice or short answers, were read aloud by native speakers, simultaneously, a different one in each test room. Naturally, the range of accents and acting talent lowered reliability, which was, in any case, not being measured at the time.

3.2 The new PALSO format

As the 1980s closed, the Council of Europe *Threshold* document was nearing the release of its second edition. The COE *Waystage* document was being finalised, and the idea of scientific calibration of language ability was in the air. These were precursors to the Council of Europe Common Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) now in use.

The English-Speaking Union (ESU) Nine-Level Scale had been developed by Richard West and Brendan Carroll, comparing English examinations from major testing boards. The comparison was aimed at schools, employers and even candidates/consumers, who needed to know exactly what a descriptive name such as Standard or Lower meant in terms of true language ability. Carroll, looking for a subject to further test the instrument, agreed

to act as consultant to the PALSO Federation as Chief Examiner in English and to design a new PALSO exam. West went on to UCLES to design their new Advanced (C1) test.

A PALSO board decision in late 1988 set the process in motion. Teachers and examiners were surveyed, sample tests were based on the results and tested in member tutoring schools over the following year. PALSO had also recently adopted computer scoring for everything except essays, which meant results could easily be collected and analysed.

As Carroll wrote in his introduction to the 1991 *Teacher's Book*, *'In all, the new tests have undergone four revisions, have been commented on by some 200 teachers, tried out on over 600 students, and analyses of over 30,000 pieces of data have been carried out'* (Carroll, 1991, p. 1).

The responses were positive. Many were enthusiastically so. In June, 1990, the new format examination was rolled out. Still printed in black on colour-coded paper, the exercise types and expected responses were more defined. Listening tests were introduced at all four levels, which prompted at least one course book publisher (Heinemann) to produce a listening series beginning at what is now termed A1 level. The listening tests were now written by Carroll and one or two assistants and recorded in the UK with

professional voice actors, for increased interest and reliability.

3.3 Speaking component

A Speaking component was added to the Standard and Higher (B1 and B2) levels, with the then-innovative 'two-plus-two' arrangement. Two examiners sat with two candidates, so, first off, candidates had a fair shake and could encourage each other. The table arrangement, with candidate opposite candidate, facilitated interaction for pair exercises. One examiner played the interlocutor, while the other observed and applied the score.

However, unlike other recent exams, the examiner responsible for rating results was encouraged to engage as needed in the conversation. They might draw out more from a candidate to confirm their assessment or shore up a flagging interlocutor. The emphasis was on a natural exchange – as much as natural is possible in the hyper-nervous exam setting – to put the candidates at ease and to work as a team to elicit the best possible performance from each candidate.

3.4 The importance of visual appeal

It was not long until new printing methods made three-colour printing economical enough to try. Again, PALS0 was at the front of the wave, producing tests that were as visually appealing as the newer course books. Colour printing also allowed testing of colour words, a vocabulary item

at the beginner levels.

4. TEACHER TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

4.1 The *Enimerosi* newsletter

While the exams were developing, teacher training also rose to the forefront. More language teachers were now available for the public school system, and the quality of teaching was rising. The private language centres kept pace. Professional seminars as well as informative commercial presentations became a standard part of regional gatherings and book fairs. Articles on pedagogy appeared in *Enimerosi*, the monthly newsletter. Teachers were encouraged to continue their professional development.

4.2 Pedagogic guides

During this period, PALS0 published a number of explanatory guides for the new test and for each skill (see e.g. Georgouli, 1995). The theoretical overview was written by Carroll, with the academics editing and supplementing. The new-format exams began being published and distributed to member schools as practice test books.

4.3 The PALS0 Guide – a collaborative work

From 1990 to 1994, the parts became the whole. Carroll, working with professors from Greek universities and school owner-educators, began compiling a syllabus (see Zarhoulakou-Nelson,

‘Professional seminars as well as informative commercial presentations became a standard part of regional gatherings and book fairs’

1990) that would reflect the new format and move it forward.

As most tutoring schools taught more than one language, professors in Italian, French and German as well as English contributed: Antonis Tsopanoglou in Italian and Vassilike Tokatlidou in French, Elisabeth Kotsia in German, Sophia Lytra and Stathis Efstathiadis in English. By design, Greece’s two largest universities were involved. Tsopanoglou, Tokatlidou and Efstathiadis represented the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, while Kotsia and Lytra were on faculty at the University of Athens. In addition to their language specialty, the professors brought expertise in applied linguistics and testing theory to the project.

They also wrote or supervised writing tests in this period (Carroll, et al., 1997; Carroll, 1999), giving them, and their students, a controlled sample on which to base further research and prepared instructions for distribution to school owners, teachers and examiners. The academic heft delivered by this university involvement continues

to ripple outwards. Graduates are now teaching in both public and private schools, working in Ministry of Education departments, research and publishing and, now as academics in their own right, training new teachers. The effort enhanced foreign language education as a desirable career and stamped the PALSO organisation with a seal of seriousness it aspired to.

4.4 The PALSO languages syllabus

All four languages eventually produced a syllabus. These publications were not uniform in style or content, but covered the same ground: the language needed to communicate and a description of how it would be tested. Differences reflected different approaches to language learning in the ‘hearth’ country as well as norms already established in exams by native boards.

English, being the language with highest enrolment, engaged more participants in its syllabus development. Owner-educator teams from around the country set to work collecting the materials to be included in the new English syllabus. PALSO had used a quite thorough structural Syllabus, developed by the late Peta Nelson, an owner-educator in Athens. Nelson also served for several seminal years as supervisor of English marking. However, language-in-use was the buzzword of the day, and the PALSO teams wanted more. Nelson’s syllabus was applied to a functional index from COE (Council of Europe). It

fit, needing only a few additions. For lexical items, another owner-educator, Dimitra Stathokopoulou from Aigio, mined the Cambridge Lexicon. Yet another team added, edited, deliberated, sliced and diced. A typist entered it into computer; one of the new digital-design firms was hired to lay it out.

The PALSO Guide was published in 1994. It opened with *What we teach*. This first and lengthier section included a forward and overall theoretical framework by Carroll. Its unique Functional-Structural Syllabus (Carroll, 1995) was laid out across facing pages, in columns using the familiar colour coding. A teacher or student could look for a function and follow its increasing complexity across the four levels of the test. Or, someone interested in what they needed to teach or learn at a given level could follow it down the coloured column, page to page.

Likewise, the vocabulary needed for any task at any level could be found in the Topical section, colour coded and sorted by topic area.

The second section of the Guide had a detailed description of the exams, including item types, score ranges, marking scales and sample exercises from actual tests. The first edition of the Guide was printed in A4 size, lightly glued on the spine and hole-punched for a ring-binder, in the hope that subsequent updates could be inserted into the

main work. They were not. Time and economics intervened.

5. POLITICS AND ECONOMICS, THE EU AND NEW CHALLENGES

5.1 CEFR and its influence

The 1990s saw the introduction of the CEFR and new efforts to assign its levels to language teaching, course materials and testing. Books were no longer rated as 'suitable for' a given level. Teachers could choose a book assigned a CEFR code, e.g. B2, to prepare students for a B2 test, from any testing board. As the new millennium dawned and market forces gained influence, the EU also pressed member states to allow the 'free flow' of language schools and exams.

The once-restricted Greek educational system would see foreign universities competing with local colleges and the Greek state system, and new tests and language institutes, chains and joint-operations entered the market.

5.2 PALSO and international exam boards

UCLES, meanwhile, had been developing and promoting tests and materials at levels below B1. In 2002-3, the UK-based Edexcel organisation, soon to be acquired by the rapidly growing Pearson empire, entered Greece. Its exams from A1 to C2 levels would compete both with the near-monopoly that Cambridge and Michigan tests had enjoyed and with the lower levels PALSO

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provided. The local company that was set up to run the Edexcel tests, wisely, contracted with the organisation most experienced in test administration, the PALSO Federation. The contract stipulated that PALSO would discontinue its tests at the B1 and B2 levels, while Edexcel/Pearson would not present their A1-A2 or pre-A1 levels in Greece. The PALSO Federation renamed its A1, A2, Pre-A1 and Beginners tests *Language Attainment Assessment System* (LAAS) and carried on. The contract allowed PALSO to share in the revenue diverted by the UK testing giant.

5.3 Impact of Greek economic crisis on language schools

On the heels of business changes came the Greek economic crisis of 2009-ad infinitum, another calamity for language schools. The much-maligned Greek public service sector had been, yes, possibly bloated, but it was also a main support for the middle-class Greek economy. Suddenly and severely cut back, its support for language tutoring likewise shrank. The shock hit some neighbourhoods harder than others. The overall scene saw tutoring enrolment and test

participation drop steadily each year as the crisis wore on (Zmas, 2015). Parents who, before the crisis, might have sent a marginal student to ‘give it a try’ and gain experience, now waited to be sure their child would succeed with the one test fee they could put down. Other families simply could afford no extra tuition expenses.

Still, most language centres held on. Those who could gave extra margin to parents who fell behind in tuition payments; some even gave pro bono lessons to needy students. Teacher wages were cut to the bone. Expenses were otherwise pared. Accounting advice on tax matters, long a standard column in the monthly newsletter, became crucial.

PALSO also held on. The LAAS tests were cut back to once a year. The marking crews, once the most experienced in Europe, were reduced. The handful of teacher-examiners remaining have added to their impressive 180 cumulative years of experience and continued to hone their insights on the essay marking scales. Examiners are paid per paper, as they have been since the beginning.

Thus, the number needed is in sync with the number of candidates, another factor in keeping the exams affordable. When the Pearson contract passed to another provider, who opted to self-administer the test, PALSO Federation took up administration of the NOCN. (It appears to go only by its acronym now, previously the National Open

College Network exams.)

5.4 Development of the European Language

Passport in Greece

In 2011, PALSO published the second edition of *The PALSO Guide* (Stathakopoulou, et al., 2011; Davenellos, 2011), updated. It now incorporated an index for the Functional-Structural Syllabus (Carroll et al., 2011) as well as for parts of speech and collocations and phrasal verbs, and additional vocabulary that had entered the language in the intervening 17 years. Both the first and second editions eschew ‘teach to the test’ and unequivocally place the emphasis on *This is what we teach. Therefore, this is what we test.* And here’s how we do it!

The test section has full transparency regarding item types, score weight among skills within the test, essay marking scales, and rationale for the result. It also has sample exercises from past tests to illustrate and map the points made.

More recently, one far-seeing board member pressed for development of a PALSO version of the *European Language Passport*. The *PALSO ELP* model received certification by Council of Europe. It will be delivered to member tutoring schools in 2018: a student-owned, student-centred document in a colourful binder, designed to keep a record of the student’s progress in English or any other language they might acquire.

‘Thus, the number needed is in sync with the number of candidates, another factor in keeping the exams affordable’

6. PALSO TODAY

6.1 High ideals that spread

There is little argument among PALSO Federation members that the organisation has done a credible job in promoting quality foreign language education. The seminars, guidebooks, practice test books and the tests themselves have contributed to this goal. As all schools sending candidates to the tests are members, there is no preferential treatment. Complaints about particular results are rare, but always checked by a supervisor. While amelioration of test scores is equally rare, teachers and owners do have a direct feedback mechanism via the testing committee. They can and do critique exercises, comment on appropriateness of content for students in Greece, and suggest changes. They also have considerable influence with course book publishers, who listen closely to suggestions in this highly competitive market.

6.2 Relationship between private and state schools

PALSO is a form of public-private partnership, not by design so much as a solution to a need that was answered by the private sector when the state was not yet able to meet it. Still, there has never been

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an attempt to replace state schools, but rather to supplement them. If the enterprise seems insular and self-serving, teaching, testing, pointing to successes – it also has a wider spin-off effect. Language centre owners, whether trained teachers or not, are dedicated to the ideals of good education. Most also live in their communities and interact with parents outside the school. They are businessmen and women with well-developed ethics. Likewise, teachers and examiners, over the years, have moved up and out. Like the owner-members, the teachers and examiners form social and professional bonds. They are a source of job referral as well as pedagogical information exchange among colleagues. Although statistics are not available, anecdotal evidence suggests a high number of those associated with the PALSO organisation are now directors of studies, inspectors for testing boards, materials writers and producers, statistics analysts and programme designers, and more, working in the state, NGO

and private sectors. Emphasis on excellence, innovation and focus on the student lies at the heart of the PALSO model.

7. CONCLUSION

The PALSO ‘experience’ spans over 50 years. It has not always been harmonious; personalities and political affiliations as well as competitive interests sometimes made for ‘colourful’ exchanges. As philosophies came and went along with changing governments, tutoring school owners enjoyed fat times alternating with nagging uncertainty and reversal. It is a testimony to determined leadership that the nationwide federation has stayed together, weathered the hard times, and come though as a gathering of colleagues. The experience may not fit all other teaching and testing organisations. Some may be set up for strictly business interest and others for strictly professional growth.

The PALSO Federation has combined both in its quest for success. To this end – the proverbial ‘better mousetrap’ – member school owners stay abreast of good management practices, explore research and new materials to motivate their students, seek dedicated teachers who desire to develop their skills, and demand a test that reliably measures their achievements or points to improvements. If a lesson is to be taken by other teaching/examining associations, it may be simply that high standards, collegiality and the will to forge a mutually beneficial path win the day.

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