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Examining the Landscape of Leadership of Charter School Executives in Low-Performing or Priority Schools in North Carolina

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Focus of the Study

Charter Schools in North Carolina have been serving students since 1997 in grades K-12. From their inception, charter schools in North Carolina have operated as their own Local Education Agency (LEA) and were created to serve the fundamental purpose of providing opportunities for teachers, parents, students, and community members to establish and maintain schools that operate independently of existing schools, as a method to accomplish the following:

- Improve student learning;
- Increase learning opportunities for all students, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for students who are identified as at-risk of academic failure or academically-gifted;
- Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods;
- Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunities to be responsible for the learning program at the school site;
- Provide parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system; and
- Hold the schools established accountable for meeting measurable student achievement results, and provide schools with a method to change from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems (North Carolina General Statute 115C-238.29A).

The ABCs of Public Education began in the 1996-97 school year as North Carolina's primary school improvement program and with three primary goals: 1.) to strengthen local school accountability, 2.) to emphasize mastery of basic subjects, and 3.) to provide as much local decision-making as possible. The ABCs model was one of the first in the nation to focus attention on the academic growth of students from year-to-year. The school designation categories remain stable in scope and in definition. School designations are listed in Figure 1.

| Designation | Performance | Growth: | | |
|----------------------------|--|-------------------------------|----------|------------------------------|
| | | Learning Achieved in One Year | | |
| | | High | Expected | Expected Growth Not Achieved |
| Honor School of Excellence | At least 90% of students at grade level and school made adequate yearly progress (AYP) | | | |
| School of Excellence | At least 90% of students at grade level | | | |
| School of Distinction | At least 80% of students at grade level | | | |
| School of Progress | At least 60% of students at grade level | | | |
| No Recognition | 60% to 100% of students at grade level | | | |
| Priority School | 50% to 60% of students at grade level, OR Less than 50% of students at grade level | | | |

Figure 1. School designations.

Each year, schools in North Carolina may receive several designations based on their performance on the state’s ABCs tests. These designations are awarded on the basis of the percentage of students performing at grade level and on whether students have learned as much as they are expected to learn in one year (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requires schools to focus on the proficiency of groups of students within each school with a goal of closing achievement gaps and bringing proficiency rates to 100 percent for every student group by 2013-2014 (www.abcs.ncpublicschools.org/abcs). AYP sets the criteria for school performance by groups of students, and schools either make AYP or not, there is no partial credit. In order to make AYP, schools need to meet all the performance targets set for them. Targets are set for performance on ABCs test, as well as student attendance. Schools work towards the goals set for them in each area as a whole and for student groups when they contain 40 or more students in defined target populations. The target populations are white, black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, multiracial, economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient, and students with disabilities (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

Except for an Annual Charter Schools Conference sponsored and coordinated by the Office of Charter Schools, within the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), the state has not established a vehicle by which the traditional public schools can examine charter schools innovations and consider them for adoption. Some stakeholders in the traditional public schools may not feel there is much to be learned from charter schools, which contributes to a disconnection between charter schools and traditional public schools. In a Fordham Institute Report, North Carolina’s charter law received an overall grade of B. However, in the same report, North Carolina received a D for its support of charter schools (Palmer and Gau, 2003).

As researchers, we need to begin examining the landscape for charter school executives in order to pose possibilities for further exploration and improvements in their professional development as they provide leadership in creating cultures that embraces change and promotes dynamic continuous improvement for a global and technological society.

Methodology and Findings

In 2007 – 2008, there were 95 charter schools in the State, serving over 32,000 students. In Figure 2, below, the chart identifies the 95 charter schools, the grade span of the population of students they

serve, the school's performance composite in reading and math, the ABCs status of the school, and whether or not the charter school made AYP.

| School Name | Grade Span | Expected Growth | High Growth | Performance Composite | ABC Status | AYP |
|--------------------------------|------------|-----------------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Alpha Academy | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 41.2 | Priority High Growth | No |
| American Renaissance School | K-8 | No | No | 62.8 | No Recognition | No |
| Arapahoe Charter School | K-8 | Yes | No | 71.5 | Progress Expected Growth | No |
| Arts Based Elementary | K-5 | No | No | 55.9 | Priority | No |
| ArtSpace Charter | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 70.7 | Progress High Growth | No |
| Bethany Community Middle | 6-8 | No | No | 66.1 | No Recognition | No |
| Bethel Hill Charter | K-6 | Yes | Yes | 74.6 | Progress High Growth | No |
| Brevard Academy | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 73.5 | Progress High Growth | Yes |
| Bridges Charter School | K-8 | No | No | 59.2 | Priority | Yes |
| C G Woodson Sch of Challenge | K-12 | Yes | Yes | 43.5 | Priority High Growth | No |
| Cape Fear Center for Inquiry | K-8 | Yes | No | 78.8 | Progress Expected Growth | Yes |
| Cape Lookout Marine Sci High | 9-12 | No | No | 50.0 | Priority | No |
| Carolina International School | K-10 | Yes | No | 81.8 | School of Distinction Expected | Yes |
| Carter Community Charter | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 46.9 | Priority High Growth | Yes |
| Casa Esperanza Montessori | PK-6 | No | No | 73.5 | No Recognition | Yes |
| Central Park School For Child | K-5 | Yes | No | 69.2 | Progress Expected Growth | Yes |
| Charlotte Secondary School | 6-6 | No | No | 58.1 | Priority | No |
| Charter Day School | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 72.9 | Progress High Growth | Yes |
| Chatham Charter | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 70.4 | Progress High Growth | No |
| Children's Community School | K-6 | Yes | Yes | 86.4 | School of Distinction High Growth | Yes |
| Children's Village Academy | K-6 | Yes | Yes | 60.7 | Progress High Growth | Yes |
| CIS Academy | 6-8 | Yes | Yes | 31.7 | Priority High Growth | No |
| Clover Garden | K-12 | Yes | Yes | 73.8 | Progress High Growth | Yes |
| Community Charter School | K-5 | Yes | No | 51.2 | Priority Expected Growth | Yes |
| Crosscreek Charter School | K-8 | Yes | No | 47.3 | Priority Expected Growth | No |
| Crossnore Academy | K-12 | Yes | No | 48.1 | Expected Growth | No |
| Crossroads Charter High | 9-12 | Yes | Yes | 23.2 | High Growth | No |
| Dillard Academy | K-4 | Yes | Yes | 49.1 | Priority High Growth | No |
| Downtown Middle | 5-8 | Yes | No | 44.0 | Priority Expected Growth | No |
| East Wake Academy | K-12 | No | No | 67.7 | No Recognition | No |
| Evergreen Community Charter | K-8 | Yes | No | 76.4 | Progress Expected Growth | No |
| Exploris | 6-8 | Yes | Yes | 91.6 | Honor Excellence High | Yes |
| Forsyth Academy | K-8 | No | No | 60.7 | No Recognition | No |
| Francine Delany New School | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 80.6 | School of Distinction High Growth | Yes |
| Franklin Academy | K-12 | No | No | 83.8 | No Recognition | No |
| Gaston College Preparatory | 5-11 | Yes | Yes | 77.2 | Progress High Growth | Yes |
| Grandfather Academy | 1-12 | Yes | No | 28.4 | Expected Growth | No |
| Gray Stone Day | 9-12 | No | No | 94.1 | No Recognition | No |
| Greensboro Academy | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 92.1 | Honor Excellence High | Yes |
| Guilford Preparatory | K-8 | Yes | No | 52.1 | Priority Expected Growth | No |
| Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School | K-12 | No | No | 43.0 | Low Performing | No |
| Healthy Start Academy | K-8 | No | No | 28.3 | Low Performing | No |
| Hope Elementary | K-5 | Yes | No | 44.4 | Priority Expected Growth | Yes |
| Kennedy Charter | 6-12 | Yes | No | 10.4 | Expected Growth | No |
| Kestrel Heights Sch | 6-12 | No | No | 58.6 | Priority | Yes |
| Kinston Charter Academy | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 45.8 | Priority High Growth | No |
| KIPP: Charlotte | 5-5 | Yes | Yes | 56.2 | Priority High Growth | No |
| Lake Norman Charter | 5-9 | Yes | No | 87.8 | School of Distinction Expected | Yes |
| Lincoln Charter | K-12 | Yes | No | 75.5 | Progress Expected Growth | Yes |
| Magellan Charter | 3-8 | Yes | Yes | 97.7 | Honor Excellence High | Yes |
| Maureen Joy Charter | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 47.8 | Priority High Growth | Yes |
| Metrolina Reg Scholars Academy | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 98.6 | Honor Excellence High | Yes |
| Millennium Charter Academy | K-8 | Yes | No | 73.4 | Progress Expected Growth | Yes |
| Mountain Discovery Charter | K-8 | Yes | No | 68.6 | Progress Expected Growth | No |
| Neuse Charter School | K-5 | No | No | 70.9 | No Recognition | Yes |
| Omuteko Gwamaziima | K-8 | N/A | N/A | 28.4 | ID NS | No |
| Orange Charter | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 73.9 | Progress High Growth | Yes |
| PACE Academy | 7-12 | N/A | N/A | 72.3 | ID NS | Yes |
| Phoenix Academy Inc | K-5 | No | No | 73.9 | No Recognition | Yes |
| Piedmont Community Charter | K-12 | Yes | Yes | 68.5 | Progress High Growth | No |
| PreEminent Charter | K-8 | No | No | 33.0 | Low Performing | No |
| Provisions Academy | 6-12 | Yes | No | 31.0 | Expected Growth | No |
| Quality Education Academy | K-10 | Yes | Yes | 54.8 | Priority High Growth | No |
| Queen's Grant Community | K-10 | Yes | Yes | 76.4 | Progress High Growth | No |
| Quest Academy | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 98.7 | Honor Excellence High | Yes |

| | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|------|-----|-----|------|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Kateigh Charter High | 9-12 | Yes | Yes | 91.2 | Honor Excellence High | Yes |
| Research Triangle Charter | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 47.2 | Priority High Growth | No |
| River Mill Academy | K-12 | Yes | No | 71.5 | Progress Expected Growth | No |
| Rocky Mount Preparatory | K-12 | Yes | Yes | 52.9 | Priority High Growth | No |
| Roxboro Community School | 7-11 | Yes | No | 74.1 | Progress Expected Growth | No |
| Sallie B Howard School | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 42.6 | Priority High Growth | No |
| Sandhills Theatre Arts Renaiss | K-8 | No | No | 50.0 | Priority | No |
| Socrates Academy | K-3 | Yes | Yes | 87.8 | School of Distinction High Growth | Yes |
| Southern Wake Academy | 9-12 | Yes | Yes | 43.0 | Priority High Growth | No |
| SPARC Academy | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 41.3 | Priority High Growth | No |
| Sterling Montessori Academy | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 81.1 | School of Distinction High Growth | Yes |
| Success Charter | K-8 | Yes | No | 45.2 | Priority Expected Growth | No |
| Sugar Creek Charter | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 46.8 | Priority High Growth | No |
| Summit Charter | K-8 | No | No | 78.1 | No Recognition | Yes |
| The Academy of Moore County | K-8 | No | No | 35.8 | Low Performing | No |
| The Hawbridge School | 9-12 | No | No | 71.6 | No Recognition | Yes |
| The Laurinburg Homework Ctr | 8-12 | Yes | Yes | 27.1 | High Growth | No |
| The Learning Center | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 78.0 | Progress High Growth | Yes |
| The Mountain Community Sch | K-8 | Yes | No | 80.1 | School of Distinction Expected | Yes |
| The New Dimensions School | K-5 | N/A | N/A | 38.1 | ID NS | No |
| Thomas Jefferson Class Academy | K-12 | Yes | No | 82.7 | School of Distinction Expected | Yes |
| Tiller School | K-5 | Yes | Yes | 70.5 | Progress High Growth | Yes |
| Torchlight Academy | K-5 | Yes | Yes | 37.4 | Priority High Growth | No |
| Two Rivers Community School | K-8 | No | No | 65.1 | No Recognition | No |
| Union Academy | K-11 | No | No | 75.6 | No Recognition | No |
| Vance Charter School | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 84.0 | School of Distinction High Growth | Yes |
| Voyager Academy | 4-7 | No | No | 74.7 | No Recognition | Yes |
| Washington Montessori | K-8 | No | No | 56.0 | Priority | No |
| Wilmington Preparatory Academy | K-4 | N/A | N/A | 30.4 | ID NS | No |
| Woods Charter | 1-12 | Yes | No | 86.8 | School of Distinction Expected | Yes |

Figure 2. 2007 – 2008 Charter schools in North Carolina.

From the chart in Figure 2, approximately thirty-five percent (35%) of North Carolina's charter schools were either designated low-performing or priority. Out of the nearly 100 charter schools, almost fifty-eight percent (58%) did not make adequate yearly progress.

A consistent theme in North Carolina's charter school landscape is the extremes of academic performance among its charter schools; a large number of charter schools either rank among the bottom performers or the top performers. According to the Blue Ribbon Commission on Charter Schools (2008), thirty percent of North Carolina's charter schools are in the bottom two deciles of charter school performers, 50% of the nearly 100 schools scored at or below the median performance in 2006-2007, and 45% of the charter schools do not perform at or above the average performance of traditional public schools in their counties. Of the 33 schools designated as low-performing or priority, in Figure 3, twenty-one (21) schools had Performance Composite Scores, from the state mandated assessment, of less than 50%.

| School Name | Grade Span | Expected Growth | High Growth | Performance Composite | ABC Status | AYP | Student Population | Source of Funds (Amount per Student) | Percentage Difference from State Average |
|--------------------------------|------------|-----------------|-------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-----|--------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Alpha Academy | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 41.2 | Priority High Growth | No | 162 | 7007 | -17.8 |
| Arts Based Elementary | K-5 | No | No | 55.9 | Priority | No | 274 | 7799 | -8.5 |
| Bridges Charter School | K-8 | No | No | 59.2 | Priority | Yes | 141 | 9746 | 14.4 |
| C G Woodson Sch of Challenge | K-12 | Yes | Yes | 43.5 | Priority High Growth | No | 406 | 10444 | 22.6 |
| Cape Lookout Marine Sci High | 9-12 | No | No | 50.0 | Priority | No | 110 | 8985 | 5.4 |
| Carter Community Charter | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 46.9 | Priority High Growth | Yes | 172 | 9790 | 14.9 |
| Charlotte Secondary School | 6-6 | No | No | 58.1 | Priority | No | 76 | 10834 | 27.1 |
| CIS Academy | 6-8 | Yes | Yes | 31.7 | Priority High Growth | No | 98 | 9296 | 9.1 |
| Community Charter School | K-5 | Yes | No | 51.2 | Priority Expected | Yes | 149 | 9008 | 5.7 |
| Crosscreek Charter School | K-8 | Yes | No | 47.3 | Priority Expected | No | 141 | 8429 | -1.1 |
| Dillard Academy | K-4 | Yes | Yes | 49.1 | Priority High Growth | No | 129 | 12023 | 41.1 |
| Downtown Middle | 5-8 | Yes | No | 44.0 | Priority Expected | No | 347 | 9183 | 7.8 |
| Guilford Preparatory | K-8 | Yes | No | 52.1 | Priority Expected | No | 262 | 7834 | -8.1 |
| Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School | K-12 | No | No | 43.0 | Low Performing | No | 150 | 9146 | 7.3 |
| Healthy Start Academy | K-8 | No | No | 28.3 | Low Performing | No | 341 | 9657 | 13.3 |
| Hope Elementary | K-5 | Yes | No | 44.4 | Priority Expected | Yes | 104 | 8755 | 2.7 |
| Kestrel Heights Sch | 6-12 | No | No | 58.6 | Priority | Yes | 398 | 9121 | 7.0 |
| Kinston Charter Academy | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 45.8 | Priority High Growth | No | 307 | 8498 | -0.3 |
| KIPP: Charlotte | 5-5 | Yes | Yes | 56.2 | Priority High Growth | No | 93 | 15528 | 82.2 |
| Maureen Joy Charter | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 47.8 | Priority High Growth | Yes | 254 | 9095 | 6.7 |
| PreEminent Charter | K-8 | No | No | 33.0 | Low Performing | No | 509 | 7734 | -9.2 |
| Quality Education Academy | K-10 | Yes | Yes | 54.8 | Priority High Growth | No | 231 | 9836 | 15.4 |
| Research Triangle Charter | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 47.2 | Priority High Growth | No | 625 | 6766 | -20.6 |
| Rocky Mount Preparatory | K-12 | Yes | Yes | 52.9 | Priority High Growth | No | 908 | 14496 | 70.1 |
| Sallie B Howard School | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 42.6 | Priority High Growth | No | 709 | 8262 | -3.0 |
| Sandhills Theatre Arts Renaiss | K-8 | No | No | 50.0 | Priority | No | 273 | 17234 | 102.3 |
| Southern Wake Academy | 9-12 | Yes | Yes | 43.0 | Priority High Growth | No | 97 | 8367 | -1.8 |
| SPARC Academy | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 41.3 | Priority High Growth | No | 131 | 9369 | 10.0 |
| Success Charter | K-8 | Yes | No | 45.2 | Priority Expected | No | 94 | 8555 | 0.4 |
| Sugar Creek Charter | K-8 | Yes | Yes | 46.8 | Priority High Growth | No | 569 | 8711 | 2.2 |
| The Academy of Moore County | K-8 | No | No | 35.8 | Low Performing | No | 146 | 7028 | -17.5 |
| Torchlight Academy | K-5 | Yes | Yes | 37.4 | Priority High Growth | No | 296 | 8982 | 5.4 |
| Washington Montessori | K-8 | No | No | 56.0 | Priority High Growth | No | 262 | 9658 | 13.3 |

Figure 3. Low-performing and priority charter schools in North Carolina.

Based on demographics of the 33 schools labeled low-performing or priority, two schools span only one grade level, five schools have an elementary focus (K-4 or K-5), and the majority of the schools (17) span grades K-8. Of the four schools designated as low-performing, three of them have a K-8 grade span and the fourth has a K-12 grade span.

In North Carolina, charter schools in need of school improvement and identified as low-performing or priority schools do not receive curricular technical support from State Assistance Teams/Turn Around Teams/Intensive Support Teams by the NCDPI. When traditional public schools fall into the category of low-performing, technical support from state teams is offered to the LEA. When charter schools are identified as low performing schools, they are at risk of closure. Nationwide, charter schools' academic performance meets or exceeds the performance of district schools, but critics charge that in North Carolina the academic quality of charter schools lags behind other schools (Stoops, 2007).

While charter schools participate in state and federal schools programs, the overwhelming number of school closures has been for fiscal or management issues rather than for academic performance. In briefly examining the financial support of charter schools in North Carolina, it should be noted that many of the schools' per student funding amounts are higher than the state average. These operating funds come from local, state, and federal sources. The financial support includes all expenses concerned with operating a charter school. The 2007 – 2008 state average per student funding about was \$8521 for NC. Of the 33 schools in Figure 3, twenty-three (23) charter schools had per student funding amounts higher than that of the state. Of the ten low-performing or priority schools that did not exceed a source of funds per student greater than the state average, seven (7) were less than 10% away from the average and one (1) was over 20% away from the state average in source of funds per student. Twelve charter schools had financial support, per student, that was 10% or greater than the state average, and 6 of these were larger than 20%, while one charter school was over 100% or twice the state average in

funding per student.

In addition to looking at Performance Composite Scores and funding, two other sources of data have been instrumental in examining the landscape in educational leadership of North Carolina charter school executives. The two sources of data were a 2008 survey (Figure 4) administered to explore the possible professional development needs of these school executives and a review conducted by the NCDPI on the credentials of the nearly 100 charter school executives.

Figure 4. Results as of 04/11/2008 from survey.

The survey was developed and administered through Zoomerang. All of North Carolina's charter school executives were invited to participate in the survey. The response rate from those invited to participate was approximately 28.4%.

| Question | Response | Percentage |
|---|----------|------------|
| Are you a licensed principal in the State of North Carolina? | YES | 48 |
| | NO | 52 |
| Does your faculty currently meet the 75% state licensure requirement for grades K-5? | YES | 83 |
| | NO | 17 |
| Does your faculty currently meet the 50% state licensure requirement for grades 6 through 8? | YES | 96 |
| | NO | 4 |
| Do you have 3 or more years experience as a licensed school principal in North Carolina? | YES | 48 |
| | NO | 52 |
| Do you feel you were adequately trained to be a Charter School principal? | YES | 33 |
| | NO | 67 |
| Do you plan to continue as a charter school principal/leader over the next five years? | YES | 67 |
| | NO | 33 |
| If a leadership program was offered that would enhance your effectiveness as a Charter School Principal, would you participate? | YES | 93 |
| | NO | 7 |

Data from the survey indicates that fifty-two percent (52%) of the respondents had less than 3 years of experience in school administration. Charter school principals are responsible for maintaining the LEA/charter school, as a traditional principal with the expectation of leading the LEA/charter school as a traditional public school superintendent, without the support of a central office staff. Data from the 2008 survey revealed that 67% of the respondents said they were not adequately trained to lead a charter school. The 2008 survey also confirmed data received from the NCDPI stating that only 50% of the nearly 100 charter school principals were licensed in school administration (M. Cash, personal correspondence, April 11, 2008).

Implications

The research suggests that we need to seek ways to increase the number of licensed school executives in low-performing or priority charter schools. The research shows that we need to design programs that will provide charter school leaders with the knowledge and skills to improve their current practice. Leadership programs should ensure the development of relationships for systems of change, in order for these charter school executives to lead competitive schools designed for student success in a 21st Century global economy. We need to develop programs that will give charter school executives the skills that will effect high academic student achievement and increase the sustainability of leaders in charter schools.

We need to design leadership programs for charter school executives that will build partnerships with community stakeholders, university school administration licensure programs, school leader-practitioners in the school district, and professional leadership organizations. We should help school executives integrate the use of data, build capacity and incorporate ethical and principled, goal-

oriented actions that lead to high academic performance, while emphasizing research-based best practices. Educational leaders must have in depth and research-based theory and practice to lead in 21st Century Schools (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005).

Lastly, there seems to be a need for leadership programs for charter school executives that will train them and a school leadership team to transform the school program, for sustainable and continuous improvement. Charter school executives need to learn and effectively model the newly adopted seven (7) North Carolina Standards for School Executives. The seven (7) standards are:

1. Strategic Leadership: School executives will create conditions that result in strategically reimagining the school's vision, mission, and goals in the 21st Century.
2. Instructional Leadership: School executives set high standards for the professional practice of 21st Century instruction and assessment that result in a no nonsense accountable environment.
3. Cultural Leadership: School executives will understand and act on the understanding of the important role a school's culture plays in contributing the exemplary performance of the school.
4. Human Resource Leadership: School executives will ensure that the school is a professional learning community.
5. Managerial Leadership: School executives that the school has processes and systems in place for budgeting, staffing, problem-solving, communicating expectations, and scheduling that result in organizing the work routines in the building.
6. External Development Leadership: School executives will design structures and processes that result in community engagement, support, and ownership.
7. Micro-Political Leadership: School executives will build systems and relationships that utilize the staff's diversity, encourage constructive ideological conflict in order leverage staff expertise.

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