



IMPROVING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: FRAMING THE OPTIONS AND IMPERATIVES FOR STATE ACTION

POLICY BRIEF: SPRING 2004

INTRODUCTION

Across the nation, early childhood education and care has long suffered from poorly organized service delivery systems, inadequate funding, and insufficient attention by the policymakers. The result is a complicated system plagued by competing interests that is in need of reform and alignment. The question of how to address governance of early childhood programs has diminished the field's capacity to meet the needs of children and families. Improving governance is an important first step toward eliciting stronger program outcomes such as heightened quality and broader access for children. Given parents' growing demand for expanded services and schools' heightened expectations for Kindergarten preparedness, improvement of early childhood service delivery is an imperative that states can no longer choose to ignore.

The issue of improving access and quality of early childhood education services is gaining momentum nationally. A growing body of research demonstrates the importance of early care and learning experiences for children's cognitive and social development and links quality preschool experiences to higher academic achievement in later years.¹ Further, economists note the importance of early education and care options for improving a region's overall quality of life and prospects for economic development.² State leaders are increasingly acknowledging the role of policy in improving the delivery and quality of early education services and are making change in this area a priority.³

Massachusetts policy makers have begun to demonstrate a commitment to confronting and helping resolve the complex challenges that face the early childhood education system in the state. This brief has been designed for use in the policy dialogue on early childhood education. It includes three features that make it a valuable tool for policy makers:

- **Framing.** It defines the current system of governance in Massachusetts and presents the imperative for change.
- **Synthesis of Promising Practices in Three Domains of Governance Reform.** It brings together information from a variety of sources to highlight innovative models from other states that could benefit Massachusetts.
- **Trajectory for Improvement.** It elaborates three different options for improving system governance in Massachusetts and identifies the particular political, financial and personnel factors that would likely arise in implementation.

¹ Mitchell, A.W. (2001) *Education for All Young Children: The Role of States and the Federal Government in Promoting Kindergarten and Pre-Kindergarten*. New York: The Foundation for Child Development; OECD (2000) *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in the United States*.

² NEDLC, 2004. *The Economic Impact of Early Care and Education on Massachusetts*.

³ Upwards of one dozen governors noted improving early childhood education as a priority in their 2004 State-of-the-State addresses (Education Week, 2004).

This report is the product of a secondary analysis of existing data and research on governance in early childhood services across the nation and within the Commonwealth. The review of research was complemented by interviews with key stakeholders and early childhood education leaders in Massachusetts as well as leaders from other states. It was also informed by the Massachusetts Early Education and Care Council Report as well as testimony at a legislative task force meeting on early childhood issues. In order to provide a range of options for policy makers, we decided to profile three states with distinctly different approaches, rather than attempting to determine the “best” systems in existence. The report is intended for policymakers’ background use and does not promote one particular course of action.

RATIONALE FOR RETHINKING GOVERNANCE

In most states across the nation, early childhood education services are provided by multiple state agencies, financed through a complex patchwork of funding streams and monitored with a web of overlapping standards. Massachusetts is no exception. The system has evolved in response to political exigencies at the state and federal level. A variety of different programs with differing goals and requirements for funding have been implemented along side one another. While these different programs are administered in relative isolation from one another at the state level, they operate within the same homes and child care centers around the state. Each child care location must participate in a number of different state and federal programs, each with its own standards and requirements, in order receive government funding to compensate staff and provide services. This system is at odds with the important goals of universal access and high quality.

A typical subsidized early childhood education program in Massachusetts receives funding from two state departments and sometimes several different federal programs. It must respond to multiple standards for programs, for student safety and class size and participate in multiple self-evaluation and monitoring reviews. The time absorbed in these compliance exercises frustrates teachers and administrators, and most importantly, shortchanges children. This system is not only inefficient, but it constitutes an impediment to the goals of quality and access. Accountability and monitoring are good and necessary, but not through a system fraught with redundancy. The advantage of an integrated system would be to eliminate inefficiency and redundancy, and promote a unified field.

Because the system is fragmented, each child care location must participate in a complex web of state and federal programs, each with its own standards and requirements.

DEFINING THE CURRENT SYSTEM IN MASSACHUSETTS

There are two state agencies that manage the bulk of public funding for early childhood services in Massachusetts— the Department of Education (DOE) and the Office of Child Care Services (OCCS). In addition, the *federal* Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has offices in Massachusetts to oversee Head Start. The federal government also provides funding for the use and the disbursement of Child Care and Development Funds (CCDF) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds into state programs. Finally, the state Department of Public Health administers the Early Intervention program for children aged birth to three years with identified developmental disabilities. The following section will focus on the role of the first two agencies.

The Department of Education (DOE) is responsible for overseeing the education of all students in the Commonwealth through twelfth grade and often beyond. Its Office of School Readiness handles early childhood education programs, the largest of which is the Community Partnership for Children (CPC) program.

The Office of Child Care Services (OCCS) is a division within the Office of Children, Youth and Family Services in the Executive Office of Health and Human Services. The office is responsible for providing a variety of care and education services for children from birth through age twelve.⁴ Its mission is to establish and enforce “strong health, safety and education standards” in child care programs throughout the state. The Office was established in 1997 as a beginning attempt at consolidation of early care services.

While services provided by the Department of Education have traditionally been focused on children’s preparation for school, the services provided by OCCS have traditionally been broader in scope extending explicitly to health and safety as well as education and care. While DOE funds go primarily to working families with low to moderate income, OCCS funds are primarily dedicated to subsidies for low-income families and those transitioning off of welfare.

The following table delineates the existing programs in early childhood services in Massachusetts by size and funding. In excess of \$300 million state and federal dollars are spent on early childhood education in the Commonwealth and subsidies extend to over 50,000 children. However, the US Census estimates that there are over 150,000 three-and four-year-olds in the state and almost 100,000 of them attend some sort of early education and care program. Almost half of participating families receive no subsidy. Moreover, the distribution of early education and care facilities is uneven. For example in Lowell, the system only has the capacity to serve one of ten eligible children. Access is currently inadequate.

Table of Existing Early Childhood Programs in Massachusetts

Program Name	Agency Affiliation	Children Served (#)	Population Served	Funding	Funding Source
Community Partnerships for Children	DOE	17,500	3 and 4 year-olds from working families	\$78.3M	State
Early Education for Children with Disabilities or Delays	DOE	8,000	Children ages 3 plus with disabilities or delays	\$9.8M	Primarily state
OCCS Child Care Services	OCCS	24,000	3 to 5 year-olds from low-income families	\$151M	Primarily federal
Head Start	ACYF	11,572	3 to 5 year-olds from low-income families	\$93M	Federal
	DOE	440		\$6.4M	State
Early Intervention	DPH	N/A	Disabled children up to age 3	N/A	State

⁴ Children with documented disabilities may receive services until age 16.

POLICY OPTIONS FOR IMPROVING SYSTEM GOVERNANCE

Our research has revealed several models that may offer politically viable options for improving governance of early childhood systems in Massachusetts. Each is considered in terms of the costs and benefits that may be incurred in implementation. Each of the states profiled here began reform several years ago with uncoordinated governance systems run through multiple state agencies. The report is laid out in such a way that policy makers may choose to model changes in Massachusetts after one of the options presented or to adopt certain key elements from each option and develop a hybrid plan for the Commonwealth.

OPTION I: STATE LEVEL PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP NORTH CAROLINA SMART START PROGRAM

STATE PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

North Carolina's Smart Start program was first authorized by the state legislature in 1993 and currently serves all 100 counties in the state. The centerpiece of the program is its governance system, which coordinates programs and services at the state level while also allowing for community-level diversity and control. With the authorization of Smart Start, a public-private governance structure called North Carolina Partnerships for Children (NCPC) was established to provide statewide oversight of the program. NCPC is a state non-profit organization with locally affiliated partnerships across the counties of the state. The state partnership and each local branch have 501(c) 3 status. Partnerships at both the state and local level bring together government, business, the nonprofit sector and community groups. The state NCPC provides financing through aligned funding streams, sets guidelines, conducts monitoring and offers technical assistance. Local organizations make all major spending and programmatic decisions.

In conjunction with the development of NCPC, the state created a brand new governmental agency, the Division of Child Development, to unify the state's role in early childhood education and care and ensure that existing early childhood services were connected to Smart Start and administered through the NCPC structure.

North Carolina's governance model is notable because it is aligned, community-based, and receives significant private sector investments.

SUCCESSSES

- Approximately 60,000 additional child care slots for children have been created since the program's inception and the number of quality child care programs in the state has increased by 283%.
- Each year, the program raises approximately 10% of its total funding through corporate donations (It is run on approximately \$192 million in state funds annually). The program has raised over \$200 million in private funding in ten years.
- North Carolina's Smart Start model has been adapted and implemented in 14 other states including Iowa and Colorado. The program has been recognized with several national public service awards.

SHORTCOMINGS

North Carolina has made significant progress in ensuring that the NCPC is involved in all policy decision making in early childhood education and care. However, there are still some overlaps in responsibility between the NCPC and the state Division of Child Development.

LESSONS FROM PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

LEADERSHIP OF THE GOVERNOR. The success of the initiative is largely attributed to the will of then-Governor James Hunt, who in 1993 used his role to advance the early childhood agenda in the state. He worked hand-in-hand with early childhood advocates in the state to develop the rationale for funding the initiative. The program was originally piloted in 12 local partnerships across the state at a cost of \$20 million.

RESPECT FOR STATE CONTEXT. Leaders of the initiative in North Carolina recognized that citizens' values were rooted in a culture of local control. Stephanie Fanjul, former Assistant Director of the state's Division of Child Development explained: "What we did know for certain was that based on North Carolina's strong tradition of county leadership, a cookie-cutter, from-the-capitol approach would never fly".⁵ North Carolina developed a system in which local decision making played a principal role, because such a system was most likely to attain public support.

A FOCUS ON EDUCATION. Early on, legislators expressed concern that Smart Start's original focus on school readiness might be obscured by the variety of care services the program offered. As a result, legislation was passed mandating that 70% of Smart Start service funds be spent on child care and education with the remaining 30% available for health and family support services.

LINKING TO MASSACHUSETTS' TRAJECTORY

North Carolina's governance model is notable because it is aligned, community-based, and receives significant private sector investments. Massachusetts could build on the strengths of its own system in moving toward a model that adopts best practices exhibited in North Carolina.

BUILDING ON LOCAL CONTROL. Massachusetts already has an infrastructure that values local control. The Community Partnerships for Children (CPC) program currently run out of the Department of Education allows for decisions about spending and programs to be made at the local level. However, CPC's are not standardized across the state as they are in North Carolina; and therefore, quality is more variable in Massachusetts. The NCPC program is run at the county level, limiting the total number of local partnerships to 100, whereas CPC's in Massachusetts number 169 and generally include only a few towns each.

Massachusetts has a significant and committed resource in the CPC's, as evidenced by the testimony of many local participants at Early Education Task Force hearings. The state's early childhood education and care system, as well as families, could benefit from integrated services that are delivered at the local level. Massachusetts currently only distributes DOE funds through the CPC's; North Carolina, by contrast, delivers almost all programs through the NCPC's. The primary improvement of adopting a model like North Carolina's is that it would bring coordination to the local level.

⁵ Dombro, A.L. (1999). *Getting Started: How Smart Start Began*. North Carolina: Families and Work Institute.

STREAMLINING SERVICES AND BROADENING PARTICIPATION. North Carolina has created an oversight board for early education and care unlike any that exists in Massachusetts today. While the Massachusetts Council on Early Education and Care acknowledged the need for a board that oversees coordinated service delivery, the board they recommended engaged the narrowest of constituencies— only the three commissioners representing the Department of Education, the Office of Child Care Services and the Department of Public Health. North Carolina’s experience suggests that the entire system, and each child in it, benefits from a democratic board that includes diverse perspectives and private sector participation.

FUNDING AND PERSONNEL CONSIDERATIONS. Adopting North Carolina’s model in Massachusetts would involve adding an umbrella state-level public-private partnership while either maintaining existing state agencies or streamlining them into one agency (an option to be discussed in the next section). However, possible costs incurred to staff and house the public-private partnership could be offset. By involving the business community in early education governance, North Carolina gained the interest of investors in the issue of early childhood education. The potential to derive the same fundraising benefits also exists in Massachusetts.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

North Carolina has a National Smart Start Technical Assistance Center for other states interested in the initiative: www.smartstart-nc.org or (919) 821-7999.

OPTION 2: NEW STATE AGENCY OR BOARD THE GEORGIA OFFICE OF SCHOOL READINESS

STATE PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Georgia’s top priority in reforming its early childhood education and care system was increasing access. In 1993, the state began piloting an expanded pre-school program with improved quality standards and, by 1995, the program became open to all four-year-olds. Georgia was the first state in the country to offer universal access to pre-Kindergarten children and did so by creating a dedicated source of revenue for education through a new state lottery. As the state stepped-up its commitment to early education and care and worked to improve access at the local level, it became clear that the system would benefit from improved coordination at the state level. In 1996, Georgia opened the Office of School Readiness, which is an independent state agency that manages not only the universal pre-Kindergarten program, but also care and health services for children and families, nutrition programs and some intervention services. The state office for the federal Head Start program is also housed in the Office of School Readiness to ensure coordination of state and federal dollars.

Georgia was the first state in the country to offer universal access to pre-Kindergarten children.

The system in Georgia parallels North Carolina’s in a couple of significant ways. First, Georgia prioritizes delivery of services at the local level to allow for a small state level staff. Also, the original catalyst for reform of the governance system came from the Governor.

SUCCESSSES

- Georgia is the only state to achieve the goal of universal access for four-year-olds.
- State pre-Kindergarten program is self-sustaining and offers slots to all four-year-olds through a state lottery specifically dedicated to supporting early childhood education.
- 55% of four-year-olds in Georgia are enrolled in the state program.
- In recognition of Georgia's success in aligning services, the state received federal grant of \$750,000 to develop a national model for state collaboration with the federal Head Start program.

SHORTCOMINGS

Georgia's decision to expand early education and care options for four-year olds has not improved opportunities for three-year-olds. In a recent report of the National Institute for Early Education Research⁶, Georgia ranked at the top in terms of access for four-year-olds, but was last in terms of access for three-year olds.

LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTATION

NEW AGENCY CAN REDUCE CONFLICT AND ELEVATE EARLY CHILDHOOD ISSUES AS A PRIORITY. When Georgia began to reform its pre-school initiative in 1993, the program was administered by the state Department of Education. However, the Governor as well as other state agencies affiliated with early childhood services continually sought input on setting the program's direction. The program effectively had "multiple bosses"⁷ who were at odds with one another, and their conflict was limiting the potential of the program. Ultimately, the Governor was able to obtain the support needed to create a separate state agency. In so doing, he elevated the status of early childhood initiatives in the state. They no longer sat at the margins of several different state agencies with conflicting goals. The Office of School Readiness had a status on a par with other independent state offices and had one unified mission that originated in the governor's office.

REFORM AGENDA FRAMED IN TERMS OF ACCESS. State leaders in Georgia crafted their message for improvement of early education and care around improving access. The state's intent to offer services to all families was a key to gaining strong public support for all dimensions of the early childhood reforms. The willingness of the legislature and the public to support reform of governance came from their desire to ensure that access was improved to its best end.

INCENTIVES TO IMPROVE QUALITY. Georgia's focus on expanding access to its pre-Kindergarten programs and services revealed other system deficiencies in need of reform. In the late 1990's Georgia shifted its reimbursement structure to create incentives for providers to hire teachers with the highest possible qualifications. Programs are reimbursed more money per pupil for teachers with advanced degrees and certifications. As of 2001-02, 80% of teachers in the pre-Kindergarten program had earned Bachelor's degrees.

⁶ National Institute for Early Education Research (2004). The State of Preschool: 2003 State Yearbook.

⁷ Raden, A.P. (1999). Universal Prekindergarten in Georgia: A Case Study of Georgia's Lottery Funded System.

LINKING TO MASSACHUSETTS' TRAJECTORY

The system in Georgia is a national model for two reasons: (1) its unified governance system and (2) its universal access. Massachusetts may want to consider the comprehensive approach Georgia took as a means of reducing conflict between state agencies and streamlining services.

DEVELOPING A UNIFIED STATE AGENCY. Georgia's Office of School Readiness allows all early education and care services in the state to be managed and run through one agency. The fact that services are delivered out of one office facilitates communication and collaboration among the administrators or programs once considered discrete from one another. Standards and compliance requirements have been coordinated as access and quality have improved. These are the signs of progress to which Massachusetts lawmakers appear to aspire. Georgia leaders framed their early childhood reforms in a manner that was most amenable to public support and the result was reduced conflict in the administration of early childhood education and an elevated profile for the issues associated with it.

An alternative or addition to the creation of an independent state agency is the creation of a state Board for Early Childhood Education and Care that parallels the Board of Education or Board of Higher Education in the State and involves diverse constituencies in early education and care policy in the state.

FUNDING AND PERSONNEL CONSIDERATIONS. From the start of early childhood education and care reform in 1993, Georgia invested far more state funding into this area than it ever had in the past. The Georgia lottery, though not likely a replicable model for Massachusetts, has been a stable and abundant resource for financing early childhood education and care, particularly the pre-Kindergarten program. State funds for the pre-Kindergarten program alone are greater than the state's federal funds for all child care programs.

Georgia leaders report minimal expansion of personnel in the state level Office of School Readiness because much program administration takes place at the local level. Although few jobs were cut, the merging of multiple state offices was a turbulent process.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Georgia's Office of School Readiness offers further information: www.osr.state.ga.us or (800) 4GA-PREK

OPTION 3: INTERAGENCY OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

As stated in the introductory comments, early education and care systems across the 50 states have been cobbled together in ways that are similar to Massachusetts. To address the lack of coordination in governance without overhauling the current system, several states have opted to establish oversight committees that bring together representatives of various agencies involved in early education and care. Committees are typically comprised of high-level leaders and are responsible for guiding policy development across multiple agencies. States that have taken this route include: Delaware, Hawaii, Kansas, Vermont, Washington and West Virginia. The approach of these states is similar to the approach recommended in the Massachusetts Early Education and Care council report, though the committees in most

states have broader representation than the committee proposed in the Massachusetts report.

Vermont's Early Childhood Steering Committee offers an example of the possible composition and authority of this type of interagency group. Its membership is comprised of representatives from seven state agencies including the Departments of Education and Developmental Services as well as representatives of Head Start, Success by Six, parent groups, higher education, program providers and community organizations. The group meets monthly and is responsible for "ensuring that policies and decisions support the development of a unified, comprehensive early childhood service system and are made in a thoughtful, inclusive and expedient manner".⁸

Most often, the origins of these committees are explained as being initiated by state legislatures or governors.

SUCCESSSES

Interagency oversight committees have varying compositions and varying levels of success in producing governance reform across the states in which they exist. Generally, they do not represent as comprehensive an effort or investment as the reforms in North Carolina and Georgia, and correspondingly, the results they elicit are more moderate. Committees in Vermont and Kansas report aligning standards for both home and center-based programs. Hawaii and Washington have been cited for their innovative approaches to financing a comprehensive early education and care programs.

SHORTCOMINGS

Interagency committees do not resolve the fundamental problem of fragmented governance. Multiple state agencies continue to oversee and advocate for different pieces of the system at once. This may be an interim solution or Phase I of an incremental approach to improved alignment, but it is not an end in itself.

LINKING TO MASSACHUSETTS' TRAJECTORY

Massachusetts may follow the lead of several other states and choose to adopt an interagency committee. The two principal reasons why this would represent a politically viable route for Massachusetts are (1) it is expedient and (2) it has the support of executive leaders.

CAPITALIZING ON CURRENT LEADERS' RECOMMENDATIONS. Creating an interagency oversight committee would capitalize on the recommendation of the Massachusetts Early Education and Care Council. The Council was comprised of the Commissioners of the Departments of Education and Public Health and the Office of Child Care Services, all of who will play an instrumental role in implementing any changes in governance. Thus, their support is significant. It is important to note, however, that other state's experience with interagency committees suggests such groups should have broader representation than just the three government-affiliated members that the Council recommended.

MINIMIZING CHANGE IN FAVOR OF EXPEDIENCE. Interagency committees represent the most expedient policy option for improving governance of the early childhood system. They are a possible means of beginning to align the most egregious

⁸ <http://www.ahs.state.vt.us/EarlyChildhood/steering.htm>

inconsistencies in standards and reporting requirements across state programs. However, the problem of competing interests and fragmentation of administration remains, and there is no evidence to suggest that conflict in leaders' interests will diminish. Creating an interagency committee may be a positive first step in building coherence of effort among agencies, thus facilitating greater collaboration among agencies at some time in the future.

FUNDING AND PERSONNEL CONSIDERATIONS. In most states, interagency committees are populated by officials who already hold paid positions within the government, which limits staff costs and negates the need for personnel expansion. This option would present minimal cost barriers.

CONCLUSION

The states profiled in this policy brief have addressed the issue of governance with different orientations, goals and state contexts. North Carolina focused on ensuring local participation, Georgia on ensuring universal access, and others on maximizing alignment while minimizing disruption to the current system. There are lessons that the three models have in common. For example:

- All required the leadership and commitment of state government officials to make change happen.
- All have had successes in aligning governance of early education and care, but continue to have areas in need of improvement.

An interagency committee may be an interim solution or the start of an incremental approach to improved alignment, but it is not an end in itself.

The states that initiated fundamental change, North Carolina and Georgia, have two other significant characteristics in common:

- They both operated from the belief that improvement at the local level was not possible without an overhaul of governance at the state level.
- They both made a substantial financial investment in early childhood education and care. Funding was used not only for improving governance systems, but also for broadening access and advancing quality at the program level.

As Massachusetts moves forward on the process of aligning and coordinating systems and service delivery, state policy makers should consider reform from four angles: vision, alignment, funding and personnel.

VISION AND POLICY FRAMING

States that have made significant progress in aligning early education systems did so by first crafting a rationale for the system and a statement of its goals. Framing the need for reform of governance at the state level in terms of the potential for improvements in access and quality at the local or program level is a strategy that has worked in other states, such as Georgia. Strong leadership and a clear vision at the state level is needed to carry the politically-sensitive process of governance reform through the legislative and budgeting processes.

ALIGNMENT

The goal of reforming governance is ultimately about aligning programs, funding and compliance. The Early Education and Care Council Report proposes to make the changes that the states profiled in this report have successfully made. These are the right steps for Massachusetts and they include:

- Adopting uniform program standards and guidelines based on current DOE standards, which have been cited as a national model;
- Streamlining the self-evaluation requirements for providers from seven different types of assessments to one;
- Coordinating program monitoring activities; and
- Establishing standard rates for service and an appropriate state payment level.

FUNDING

In addition to poorly aligned governance systems, funding of early childhood education and care is presently inadequate. Research has clarified that “the current level of federal and state funding is not adequate to make services available to the number of children who would potentially benefit from participating in services”.⁹ Each of the states chronicled here more than doubled their early education and care budgets, but believe the benefits, in terms of school readiness and minimized need for social services and special education in the future, far outweigh the costs. The lesson for Massachusetts is that significant change requires investment.

The system by which child care programs are reimbursed is outdated. The amount local providers receive per child from OCCS has changed little in the past decade as the actual cost of living in the Commonwealth has soared. Education and care facilities that are funded primarily through subsidized state slots take in far less revenue than other programs that can charge more affluent parents a market-driven rate. Parents who can afford to pay for programs with lower percentages of subsidized slots do, which is creating a two-tiered system in the state.

PERSONNEL

The state models reviewed in this analysis could be adapted to Massachusetts with minimal growth in state level administration. The amount of private funding generated by North Carolina far exceeded the costs of administration at the state level. Both North Carolina and Georgia make an explicit effort to minimize administration at the state level in favor of increasing revenues to local decision makers. States that create interagency oversight committees capitalize on and re-direct the energy of existing human resources. The most significant personnel investments would need to be made at the local level through efforts to improve workforce compensation. If Massachusetts makes a commitment to improving access by creating more slots, personnel needs will expand substantially at the local level.

In conclusion, other states offer useful lessons on both the content of an improved governance system for early education and care and the process by which such a system might be attained in Massachusetts. As the Commonwealth embarks on this important work, the states profiled here can serve as beacons toward the system that might be developed.

⁹ Center for Law and Social Policy (2001). *Policy Matters: Setting and Measuring Benchmarks for State Policies*. Washington, DC: Author.

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