

LRE News

The State Education Resource Center's *Least Restrictive Environment* Initiative aims to increase the number of placements of students with disabilities in general education classrooms and to promote access to the general education curriculum for all students with disabilities regardless of setting. The *LRE News* devotes each issue to a topic pertinent to these goals. This issue focuses on the contributions of paraprofessionals to high-quality educational programming for students with disabilities.

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The Roles of the Connecticut Paraprofessional: Challenging, Complex

Paraprofessionals have a word for it: fading.

Fading is when they help just enough to get a child going, but not too much to cause unnecessary dependence. The paraprofessionals' work, for the moment, is done. That's when they fade.

School districts are always striving to achieve that perfect balance with paraprofessionals, who are sought out more and more as inclusive practices grow. To meet the growing demand, in 2008 the Connecticut General Assembly authorized the expansion of paraprofessional training through the State Education Resource Center (SERC) and established a Paraprofessional Advisory Council to report on the need for additional professional development. [For more on the legislation, see p. 4.]

According to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), a paraprofessional is "an employee who assists teachers and/or other professional educators or therapists in the delivery of instructional and related services to students."¹ The paraprofessional works under the supervision of a teacher "or other certified or licensed professional." This definition implies that paraprofessionals serve the teacher, not a student, although many parents continue to associate their child with a specific paraprofessional—even when paraprofessionals do not always work one-to-one with any one particular student.

Yet parents support the use of one-to-one paraprofessionals as a way to satisfy the inadequacies of special education, says Michael Giangreco, professor of education and researcher at the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion at the University of Vermont. General education teachers, with

an eye on their caseloads, might ask for paraprofessionals even more than parents do. Schools justify the need for 1-to-1 paraprofessionals so more of them will be funded, Giangreco says. This does not necessarily serve the students' best interests, however.

Giangreco has examined issues surrounding paraprofessionals in-depth (some of his whimsical cartoons on the subject are reprinted on the following pages), and chronicled the drawbacks of over-reliance on paraprofessionals in the classroom. One drawback is that parents might have a more difficult time monitoring their child's independent progress if the paraprofessional does not adequately fade.

Second, the achievement of students with paraprofessionals can be perceived differently from the achievement of other students because of misunderstandings about a paraprofessional's role.

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FOCUS ON PARAPROFESSIONALS

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Role

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For example, a student's achievement is sometimes partly—and inaccurately—attributed to the paraprofessional, says Jennifer Nagel, a former certified special education teacher and supervisor of paraprofessionals at Sedgwick Middle School in West Hartford who is now with Rocky Hill Schools. (The student might hear, “You have an adult helping you and you got only a C?”) Ideally, paraprofessionals are facilitating students' ability to do the work but not helping them do it, she says.

A third drawback: When a paraprofessional's role is unclear, it can get in the way of the free appropriate public education (FAPE) required by law. Some students with one-to-one supports get the majority of their instruction from paraprofessionals rather than from highly qualified teachers, Giangreco says. No one expects middle and high school teachers to be highly qualified across multiple disciplines, yet that is often what is expected of paraprofessionals. In Giangreco's research, more than two-thirds of paraprofessionals reported making curricular or instructional decisions without supervisory direction from a certified educator.²

Overextending paraprofessionals also might have the effect of separating students from their classmates and causing unnecessary dependence. While Giangreco's research has shown that many younger children think of their paraprofessional as their parent—which suggests overdependence—older students report sometimes feeling embarrassed by needing a paraprofessional and feeling as if they have their own personal teacher watching over them all the time.

“Kids won't be kids if there's always a teacher around,” says Nagel.

Classroom teachers, too, need to know that students assisted by paraprofessionals still need the teachers' full attention. The presence of paraprofessionals does not preclude the use of differentiated instruction, says Glenn McGrath, director of pupil services for West Hartford Schools.

With this in mind, West Hartford, which has approximately 135 paraprofessionals in special education, follows certain

practices to build on the strengths of the paraprofessional-student relationship and avoid the pitfalls. No district has a one-size-fits-all model for using paraprofessionals, and many districts, including West Hartford, continue to enhance their approach.

First, West Hartford paraprofessionals are assigned to work with several students, and vice versa. This reduces the student's dependence on one particular paraprofessional, and allows paraprofessionals to learn to work with a variety of students.

“We just think that paraprofessionals are assigned to classrooms and programs, not to individuals,” McGrath says.

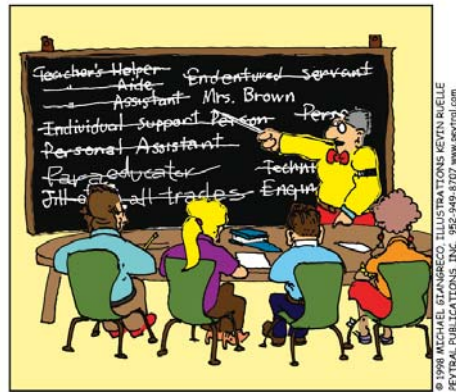
Second, the district encourages good communication between the paraprofessional and the classroom teachers. The paraprofessionals are given time to debrief. Because some of them work with the same students, they can share their experiences.

The paraprofessionals are expected to provide the teachers with relevant information and observations that the teacher might not know about. Parents must seek out the teacher, not the paraprofessional, to discuss their child. The teacher should still be the go-to person even if the parents ask paraprofessionals to attend their child's Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings.

Third, paraprofessionals must have adequate access to professional development. Schools and districts must find a way to fund time that paraprofessionals might spend outside of the classroom for training or attending meetings. Some professional development is held during school hours, such as SERC's annual “Paraprofessionals as Partners” conference in the fall, but SERC also holds training for paraprofessionals before the school year begins and schedules others after school hours.

Fourth, as suggested in Connecticut's Guidelines for the Training and Support of Paraprofessionals Working with Students Birth to 21 (2008), West Hartford created a handbook that outlines the expectations and roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals (referred to in West Hartford as “paraeducators”). It suggests that one way to facilitate student achievement is to support student independence. A paraeducator should allow a student to have

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AFTER A GRUELING MEETING, THE STAFF DECIDES TO LET MRS. BROWN KEEP HER NAME.



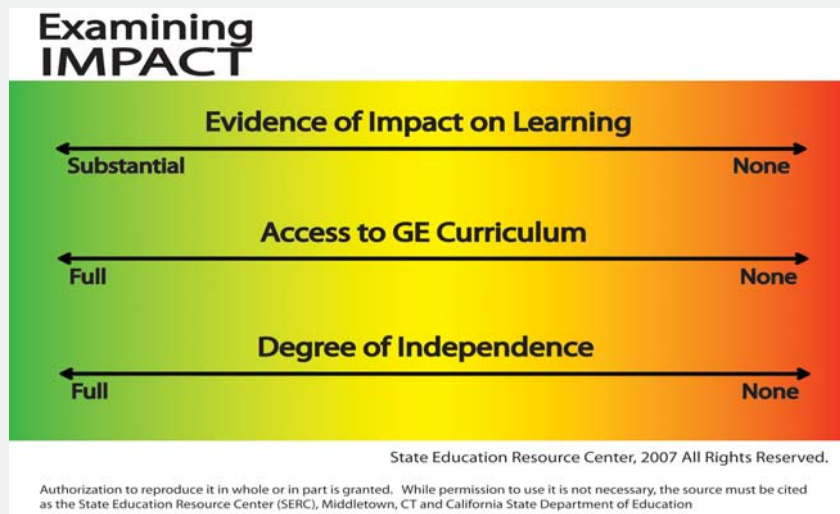
GOING IN THROUGH THE PARAPROFESSIONAL DOOR



EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF PARAPROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

One-to-one paraprofessional support for a student with disabilities—especially students with significant disabilities—can have several unintended consequences, according to research. Two significant concerns are separation from classmates and unnecessary dependence, says Michael Giangreco of the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion at the University of Vermont.

Before making a decision to use one-to-one paraprofessional support, a Planning and Placement Team (PPT) should consider the impact on a student's overall learning opportunity, on access to the general education curriculum, and on the student's independence. The State Education Resource Center (SERC), in collaboration with the Connecticut State Department of Education, has developed an "Examining Impact Tool" to assist in that decision:



Guiding Questions for the Conversation

1. Level of impact on learning

What evidence do we have that the use of one-to-one paraprofessional support will increase the rate and progress of a student's learning?

2. Access to general education curriculum

Will the use of one-to-one paraprofessional support increase access to the general education curriculum by:

- removing environmental and instructional barriers to learning?
- increasing student participation in general education activities and tasks?

3. Fostering independence

Will the use of one-to-one paraprofessional support increase a student's capacity to independently:

- use naturally occurring resources and supports, such as peers and materials?
- use his/her accommodations, such as assistive technology?
- problem-solve and generalize learning to new situations?
- interact with non-disabled peers and adults other than the paraprofessional?

Analysis of the Conversation

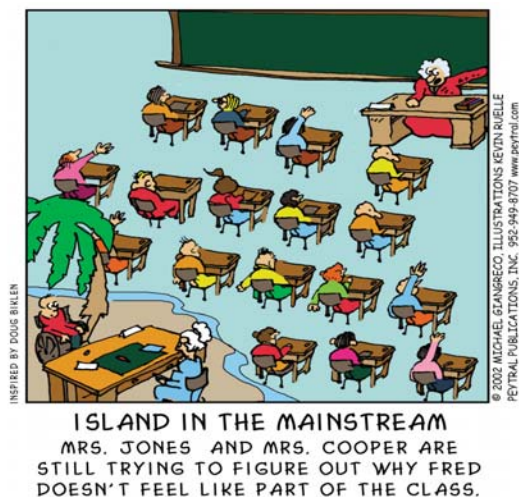
The PPT can use the Examining Impact Tool to measure the level of impact in each of these areas and conduct an overall analysis to determine if paraprofessional support is appropriate. Then it can make adjustments in how and when paraprofessional support is used. For example, a PPT may determine that a paraprofessional is needed only to assist a student with mobility during activities requiring movement, but is not needed during seatwork.

Role

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enough space to make his/her own decisions, successes, and mistakes, and to become responsible for his/her own learning. At the same time, the paraeducator should keep a careful balance of support and intervention. In an ideal situation, the paraeducator should be viewed by the outsider as an assistant to the teacher and classroom, not the individual student.

This concept is expressed succinctly on a page at the beginning of the handbook: “Your GOAL for the student(s) you work with is to help them build confidence and increase independence,” it says. “Learn to ‘fade’ when possible.”



Finally, the district is developing a formal paraprofessional evaluation, based on evaluation guidelines from the CSDE. Danbury and Middletown are among the districts with existing paraprofessional evaluations that CSDE identifies as models in the Connecticut guidelines.

Administrators, not teachers, have the authority and credentials to evaluate paraprofessionals—although evaluators would certainly consult with the teachers since they are the ones who observe the paraprofessionals the most. The state guidelines suggest that evaluations are completed at least once a year.

Evaluations have become critical not only for paraprofessionals to evaluate their own performance, but also to strengthen the classroom environment in which paraprofessionals have become more important.

“The role has gotten bigger and better,” McGrath says. “It certainly is growing.” ♦

¹Connecticut State Department of Education. (2008). Guidelines for Training and Support of Paraprofessionals Working with Students Birth to 21.

²Giangreco, M. (2009, May 27). Paraprofessional Supports in Inclusive Schools: Research, Practices and Alternatives. Webinar sponsored by the Inclusive Schools Network, Education Development Center, Newton, Mass.

CONNECTICUT PARAPROFSSIONAL LEGISLATION

Sec. 10-155j of the 2008 Supplement to the General Statutes. Development of paraprofessionals. The Department of Education, through the State Education Resource Center and within available appropriations for such purposes, shall promote and encourage professional development activities for school paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities. Such activities may include, but shall not be limited to, providing local and regional boards of education with training modules and curricula for professional development for paraprofessionals and assisting boards of education in the effective use of paraprofessionals and the development of strategies to improve communications between teachers and paraprofessionals in the provision of effective student instruction.

Sec. 10-155k of the 2008 Supplement to the General Statutes. School Paraprofessional Advisory Council. The Commissioner of Education shall establish a School Paraprofessional Advisory Council consisting of one representative from each state-wide bargaining representative organization that represents school paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities. The council shall advise, at least quarterly, the Commissioner of Education, or the commissioner’s designee, of the needs for the training of such paraprofessionals and the effectiveness of the content and the delivery of existing training for such paraprofessionals. The council shall report, at least quarterly, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, on the recommendations given to the commissioner, or the commissioner’s designee, pursuant to the provisions of this section, to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to education.

Sec. 28 of PA 07-3 of the June Special Session. Not later than December 1, 2008, the department shall report and make recommendations to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to education concerning professional development for paraprofessionals and the status and future of school paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities.

Public Act 08-169 (signed by Governor on June 12, 2008). Autism: Requires the Commissioners of Education, Higher Education and Developmental Services and the President of Southern Connecticut State University to define autism and developmental disabilities and to develop recommendations by February 1, 2009, for a comprehensive state-wide plan to incorporate methods of teaching children with autism and other developmental disabilities into teacher preparation programs, teacher certification requirements, in-service training for educators and training provided to school paraprofessionals.

FAQS ABOUT *Paraprofessionals*

What is Connecticut's definition of a paraprofessional?

A paraprofessional is an employee who assists teachers and/or other professional educators or therapists in the delivery of instructional and related services to students. The paraprofessional works under the direct supervision of the teacher or other certified or licensed professional. The ultimate responsibility for the design, implementation, and evaluation of instructional programs, including assessment of student progress, is a collaborative effort of certified and licensed staff.

Is the teacher the paraprofessional's supervisor?

Yes, but there is a difference between the person responsible for hiring and evaluation of performance (an administrator) and the person directing day-to-day work with students (the teacher). Often the teacher provides the day-to-day supervision of the paraprofessional, while an administrator, such as a principal, program manager, or special education director, completes the evaluation. "Teachers should have supervisory functions as to program implementation, including planning, assigning duties, and checking with paraeducators as to their comprehension of their assigned duties. Teachers must not be expected to have administrative management duties such as the hiring or firing of paraeducators. Those duties belong to the administration."³

What is the definition of "direct supervision?"

According to federal guidelines in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB): "A paraprofessional works under the direct supervision of a teacher if (1) the teacher prepares the lessons and plans the instructional support activities the paraprofessional carries out, and evaluates the achievement of the students with whom the paraprofessional is working, and (2) the paraprofessional works in close and frequent proximity with the teacher."

Can a paraprofessional see a student's IEP? Attend a student's PPT meeting?

There is no state or federal regulation prohibiting a paraprofessional from seeing a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). In fact, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) encourages paraprofessionals whose support includes students with disabilities to have an understanding of the IEP information that is pertinent to their role as an implementor. Paraprofessional attendance at Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings is an individual district and school-based decision. It is important that district or school personnel explain their policy on the attendance of paraprofessionals at PPTs to both parents and school staff. If a paraprofessional spends an extensive amount of time with a

student, a decision might be made for that paraprofessional to attend the student's PPT. If a paraprofessional is required in the IEP and does not attend a student's PPT meeting, it is the responsibility of the student's teacher and the paraprofessional's supervisor to communicate in detail with the paraprofessional about the student before and after the PPT.

Can a paraprofessional act as a substitute for a teacher if the paraprofessional is not certified?

Paraprofessionals who have a bachelor's degree can serve as a short-term substitute (in the same position for up to 39 days). Districts must get approval for any substitute who is serving in the same classroom/position for more than 39 days. Districts can also allow a person who does not hold a BA to serve as a short-term substitute with the approval of the CSDE Bureau of Certification.

Can a paraprofessional be asked to perform personal care duties (i.e. toileting)?

Toileting is an activity of daily living and generally falls under the responsibility of a paraprofessional. If the child has special needs, the Guidelines for Special Health Procedures for School Nurses (1997) does say that the school nurse should assess the situation to ensure that the proper position, equipment available, etc., are in place and that any training for the paraprofessional should be provided. This document is available in school nurses' offices or by calling (860) 807-2108.

What is the paraprofessional's role in Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI)?

SRBI is Connecticut's Framework for Response to Intervention (RTI), a process used to determine if and how students respond to instruction, including social/emotional learning. RTI provides a framework for school teams for designing, implementing, and evaluating educational interventions in a timely manner. Collaboration among all school staff ensures positive learning experiences and outcomes for struggling students whose needs are identified early. Paraprofessionals can be a valuable part of SRBI teams by assisting classroom teachers and special educators with screening, assisting teachers with benchmarking and progress monitoring assessments, recording observations of behavior and learning strategies, entering assessment data into a management system, serving as a member of the intervention team, and collaborating with teachers to provide support for students, implement interventions, and participate in school-wide professional development.

³Connecticut State Department of Education. (2008). Guidelines for Training and Support of Paraprofessionals Working with Students Birth to 21.

Adopted from "Frequently Asked Questions About Paraprofessionals," published by the Connecticut State Department of Education and the State Education Resource Center, August 2009. The full text is available online at www.ctserc.org/parafaq.

RESOURCES ON *Paraprofessionals*

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) - www.aft.org/psrp

The Paraprofessional and School-Related Personnel (PSRP) division of the AFT provides information, resources, and professional development for paraprofessionals and support staff.

National Clearinghouse for Paraeducator Resources (NCPR) - www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/Clearinghouse.html

This provides a comprehensive repository of information, as well as a forum to further the discussion, for achieving the goal of bringing talented paraeducators into the ranks of our nation's teaching force.

National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals (NRCP) - www.nrcpara.org

NRCP serves paraeducators; teachers; policymakers and administrators; other education professionals; occupational, physical and speech-language therapists; early childhood specialists; personnel developers in two- and four-year colleges and universities; and other stakeholders in addressing policy questions and other needs of the field. It provides technical assistance and shares information about policy questions, management practices, regulatory procedures, and training models that will enable administrators and staff-developers to improve the recruitment, deployment, supervision, and career development of paraprofessionals.

Rhode Island Technical Assistance Project (RITAP) - www.ritap.org/TA/about-us/about.php

Developed by the Rhode Island Department of Education, RITAP provides information on teacher assistant-related legal requirements and effective practice, training opportunities, resources, training materials, PowerPoint presentations, and a quarterly teacher-assistant newsletter.

Michael Giangreco's home page - www.uvm.edu/~mgiangre

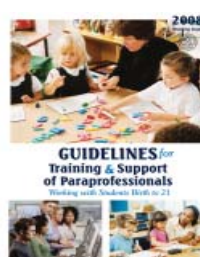
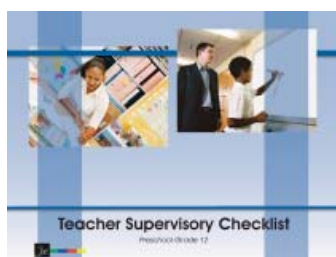
Michael Giangreco is a professor at the University of Vermont. His Web site includes resources with a focus on effective utilization of paraprofessionals as well as how to plan, adapt, coordinate, implement, and evaluate educational programs and services for students with disabilities who are included in general education classrooms.

Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI) - Paraprofessional Information and Resources - www.ct.gov/sde/para-cali

This Connecticut State Department of Education Web page provides information on paraprofessional regulations and legislation, professional development opportunities, and other resources for paraprofessionals.

Guidelines for Training & Support of Paraprofessionals Working with Students Birth to 21 - www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Special/Guidelines_Paraprofessionals.pdf

This Connecticut State Department of Education publication highlights the increasing numbers of paraprofessionals in our state, the current requirements under NCLB, and the importance of training for paraprofessionals, as well as their supervisors and evaluators. It includes sample tools that define appropriate roles and responsibilities for paraprofessionals. These tools will further assist schools in becoming better skilled in determining the paraprofessional's role and impact on student learning.



The Importance of Responsible Inclusive Practices

A Settlement to

P.J. ET AL. v. STATE OF CONNECTICUT, BOARD OF EDUCATION, ET AL.

In 1991, a case was filed by five school-age children with mental retardation and their families. It was certified as a class action lawsuit on December 13, 1993. The class membership includes all school-age children with the label mental retardation/intellectual disability on or after February 20, 1991 who are not educated in regular classrooms.

The settlement to *P.J. et al. (Plaintiffs) v. State of Connecticut, Board of Education, et al. (Defendants)* was approved by the federal court on May 22, 2002. The agreement provides that the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) demonstrate progress each year in the following goals and outcomes:

1. an increase in the percent of students with mental retardation or intellectual disability who are placed in regular classes, as measured by the federal definition (i.e., eighty [80] percent or more of the school day with non-disabled students);
2. a reduction in the disparate identification of students with mental retardation or intellectual disability by Local Education Agency (LEA), by racial group, by ethnic group, or by gender group;
3. an increase in the mean and median percent of the school day that students with mental retardation or intellectual disability spend with non-disabled students;
4. an increase in the percent of students with mental retardation or intellectual disability who attend the school they would attend if not disabled (i.e., "home school");
5. an increase in the percent of students with mental retardation or intellectual disability who participate in school-sponsored extracurricular activities with non-disabled students.

To ensure that Connecticut demonstrates progress toward these goals/outcomes, the jurisdiction of the Court for enforcement of this Agreement will continue for five (5) years. For a period of eight (8) years, the Court may entertain Plaintiffs' motions for substantial non-compliance with this Agreement.

Among the specific responsibilities of the CSDE is the development of policy statements. The Commissioner of Education has issued a policy letter that reiterates the State Board of Education's position, which affirms the right of each child with mental retardation or other disability to be educated with non-disabled children to the maximum extent appropriate.

The Chief of the Bureau of Special Education of the CSDE issued a policy memorandum with further information regarding:

- (1) the individual student decision-making process that must be followed by the Planning and Placement Team (PPT);
- (2) the CSDE's responsibilities for oversight of LEA activities to ensure compliance; and
- (3) the joint state and local obligation to work toward greater inclusion of students with mental retardation in all aspects of the school program.

Each superintendent of schools, LEA school board member, special education due process hearing officer, and teacher preparation program in Connecticut received these policy memorandums along with a copy of the Agreement.

Program Compliance Review of LEAs by the CSDE, including targeted database monitoring, will facilitate improvement in each of the goals through consistent feedback to all LEAs on their performance in achieving these goals. Monitoring will include, but is not limited to, participation and progress of class members in the general curriculum, use of out-of-district placements, availability of supplementary aids and services, and the use of promising practices. Focused monitoring to identify and provide solutions will occur in districts not making satisfactory progress toward the goals or who are found deficient as a result of monitoring activities.

To enable LEAs to extend and improve education in regular classes for class members, a technical assistance system with a sufficient number of qualified specialists will be developed to assist LEAs in carrying out their responsibilities.

Training programs to enable parents of class members to effectively advocate for the education of their children in least restrictive environments will focus on topics such as: Individualized Education Program (IEP) development, management and teaching activities and routines, and the development of active parent groups.

To support attainment of these goals, a Complaint Resolution Process will be maintained by the CSDE in accordance with requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In addition, a four (4) member Expert Advisory Panel (EAP) to advise the parties and the Court regarding the implementation of the Agreement has been established.

For further information about the Agreement, or about activities for families of students with intellectual disabilities, which are being coordinated by the Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC), Connecticut's Parent Training and Information Center, please contact Rhonda Kempton, Consultant, Bureau of Special Education, (860) 713-6924, rhonda.kempton@ct.gov.

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