

A Critical Policy Analysis: Making the Case for Equitable Collaborations in Resource Allocation Processes Post – Pandemic

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the intersection of social class inequality and education policy through the lens of an analysis of the experiences and effects of state, local, and federal policy meant to engage communities around the use of federal funds to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students. We intend to examine the discord between policy financed by the U.S. Federal government and practice. In doing so, we will cast a critical lens toward the application of policies that promote stakeholder engagement in the decision making process for determining how to use federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, which were funds obligated to schools and communities in order to mitigate the affects of the Covid 19 pandemic. This paper will review policy aimed at assessing whether state and local guidance promoted the implementation of the federal guidance. Given the role of federal education awards are to assist in supplementally financing education at the local level, our review will include reviewing state and local education agencies (also referred to as districts) applications, state and local education guidance; public school board meeting material, memorandums;,and other publicly available resources designed to provide guidance to schools and districts on funding schools with the emergence federal ESSER funds. These documents have been chosen as representative of current policy. They are sociocultural artifacts that mediate policy and practice for schools across

the country and touch on socio-dynamic issues of society and therefore they need to be viewed critically.

Background on ESSER. To address challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Congress created and funded the ESSER fund, providing an unprecedented level of resources to states and districts, with very loose guidance on how the money could be spent. The U.S. Department of Education has provided numerous resources to help state departments of education, school districts, and schools understand and wisely use these resources (see the [Office of Elementary and Secondary Education's ESSA webpage](#)), and is monitoring spending through regular reports and a planned reporting form.ⁱ

For all states, the U.S. Department of Education provided guidance on spending as well. Under this guidance states were to make awards to LEAs or districts. Each state was also required to allocate 90 percent of the funds to eligible districts. The district were allowed to use the funds to support any of the allowable activities listed in the guidance. Moreover, under section [20 U.S.C. 1231g](#) of the the Interim Final Rule (IFR) and federal guidance, the U.S. Department of Education made stakeholder engagement a core element of the State and LEA planning process for deciding how to use ESSER funds. The requirement called for “meaningful consultation” from stakeholders on state plans and included in the state plan template language for State Education Agencies to describe how they engaged the public and provided the opportunity to provide input in the development of the plan and a summary of the input. Furthermore, the federal guidance included language that stated the following... “stakeholder consultation is essential and we look forward to seeing and being able to amplify best practices on how States and LEAs are engaging the diverse communities that they serveⁱⁱ”

Critical policy analysis as methodology

Critical policy analysis refers to a form of education policy studies where the focus is upon exposing inconsistencies between what policy says and what policy does, particularly in the terms of power relationships in society (Diem, et al, 2014).

Mainly the focus of this work is upon exploring how marginalized groups come to be marginalized through policy and how existing distributions of wealth and capital (economic, cultural and social) can be mailed through policy (Cahill, 2015).

Critical policy analysis must locate power in policymaking processes and challenge conditions of inequity (Ball, 1994; Molla, 2021). This type of policy research examines inequities from perspectives (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Geertz, 2008).

Researchers who adopt a critical stance focus on locating power in social practices by understanding, uncovering, and transforming conditions of inequity embedded in society (Rogers, 2004). This critical consciousness challenges assumptions that privilege some and oppress others (Willis, 2008).

There are several areas that are central to our study. First, challenges to the theory and practice of policy analysis have occurred for decades, and critics have been reacting to the record of policy analysis- the lack of a compelling theoretical base, a failure to anticipate unintended consequences, poor utilization by policymakers, displacement by politics, or implementation failures (e.g. DeLeon, 1988). Second, is Yosso and Ishimaru 's work on community cultural wealth and equitable collaborations. Yosso (2013) expands the notion of leveraging social capital to improve outcomes for students by including additional capital termed "community cultural wealth" that is developed and nurtured in communities of color, and include aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. While forms of capital are acquired by individuals, cultural wealth is meant to be shared within a community (Yosso, 2013). The overlapping spheres of influence is a structure in

which stakeholders interact, allowing schools to function as a community and the sharing of combined school community wealth to strengthen relationships, maintain communication, and encourage advocacy, all in service of the shared mission of improving student learning.

More recently, scholars have pushed the field to center critical and equity-oriented issues such as examining the ways that educational leaders share power with families that have been historically excluded by schools, value their expertise and knowledge, and partner with them to address equity issues that they prioritize (Ishimaru, 2020, Khalifia 2018). These types of school and community partnerships work toward what Ishimaru (2020) calls equitable collaborations, that is, “a process that seeks to move beyond the good parent/bad parent’ dichotomy to foster solidarities amid difference toward community-determined educational justice and well-being.

On the policy level, policy makers have long seen parents and families as key levers for improving student outcomes and success (Marsh, Strunk, Bush, & Huguet, 2015; Sanders, 2012). A growing wave of cross-sector collaborative efforts has increasingly highlighted a broader policy context for work to engage parents and families in education, particularly in diverse, low-income communities. On the federal level, initiatives -such as the Promise Neighborhood Initiative—has accompanied a number of cross-sector collaborations (Ishimaru, 2020). Efforts such as these were designed to build strategic partnerships between schools, community-based organizations (CBOs), advocates, businesses, governmental agencies, and the public-at-large around a shared vision and indicators of improved educational outcomes for students “cradle-to-career,” especially within a particular neighborhood, city, or region (Horsford & Heilig, 2014; Kania & Kramer, 2011; Lawson,

2013; Park, et al, 2013). Such initiatives seek to remedy a lack of coordination, common goals, and shared metrics in previous, disparate efforts to improve educational outcomes (Henig, et al, 2015). Amid persistent outcome disparities between White, middle-class students and those from low-income, immigrant, refugee, or other communities of color, such policies and reforms increasingly position parents, families, and communities as potential drivers of educational equity, (Ishimaru, 2020). Again, where research has proven that these forms of collaborative efforts among families, schools, and communities hold much promise for improving the success of young people (Ishimaru, 2014; Warren, 2005).

Methods

Through the lens of critical policy analysis this research was designed to answer the following questions:

1. In lieu of the federal guidance, are policymakers at across state education agencies providing policy guidance to districts that promote a culture of community engagement, particularly for those most impacted by the pandemic, when deciding how to allocate ESSER funds?
2. In lieu of federal guidance, are districts providing policy guidance that promotes a culture of community engagement, particularly for those most impacted by the pandemic, when deciding how to allocate ESSER funds?

These questions speak to the interpretation of federal policy guidance around stakeholder engagement. To better understand these questions we reviewed publicly available data published on state education agencies and district websites from the five largest states that received ESSER funds. Furthermore, within those five states we reviewed publicly available data from the two districts that received

the largest ESSERs funding. For the purpose of this analysis we reviewed the data pertaining to Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER I) and (ESSER II) funding. Additionally, we read publicly available resources included U.S. Department of Education guidance, published letters from State Commissioners, Superintendents, reviewed Frequently Asked Questions guidance at the state and local levels, district applications, local and state developed tools, policy memorandums and other ESSER Guidance (including assurances and other publicly available resources).

To address our research questions, we frame our review around the policymaking processes and center the discussion exclusively on the Critical Policy Analysis five broad concerns identified by Diem, Young, Welton, Mansfield and Lee (2014):

1. The difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality
2. The roots and development of policies
3. The distribution of power, resources, and knowledge (i.e. who gets what and why)
4. Social stratification, inequality, and privilege
5. How non dominant groups resist and engage in policy efforts

Findings and Discussion

For the purpose of this study, we reviewed the public available websites of the following five states; California, Texas, New York, Florida and Illinois. During ESSERs I and II, the states received approximately \$27 billion in ESSER funds (See Table 1). While the data and sample size was limited to publicly available data, this paper offer a picture of the disconnect of federal policy and the implementation of policy to carrier out a major legislative action. There may be data that adds to this conversation that is not public. However, the lack of transparency of that

data should be called into question, given the charge to engage communities. If communities are to be engaged, the process should be public.

Table 1
Top 5 states receiving the most ESSER funds

State	ESSER I Award Amount	ESSER II Award Amount
California	\$1,647,306,127	\$6,709,633,866
Texas	\$1,285,886,064	\$5,529,552,209
New York	1,037,045,603	\$4,002,381,738
Florida	\$770,247,851	\$3,133,878,723
Illinois	\$569,467,218	\$2,250,804,891
	\$5,309,952,863	\$21,626,251,427

Furthermore, we reviewed publicly available data for 10 districts. These school districts are all large public and urban districts that serve a large portion of students from poverty. For each of the five states we reviewed publicly available data for the two largest districts (the two districts receiving the highest dollar amount of money), see Table 2. The funding amounts are based on student need based on a federal funding formula that is based on the number of students of poverty (poor children) each district serves.

Table 2

Districts	ESSER I District Dollars	ESSER II
Los Angeles Unified Schools (California)	\$289,701,970	\$1,147,249,170
Fresno Unified School District (California)	\$43,686,554	\$173,003,187
Miami-Dade County SD (Florida)	\$119,252,953	\$468,534,260
Broward County (Florida)	\$61,986,936	\$256,878,407
Chicago Public Schools (Illinois)	\$206,082,584	\$796,758,488
Rockford Public Schools (Illinois)	\$11,696,123	\$64,258,904
New York City Public Schools (New York)	\$616,125,123	\$2,136,443,534
Buffalo City School District (New York)	\$25,424,863	\$89,163,366
Houston Independent School District (Texas)	\$81,977,178	\$358,195,503
Dallas Independent School District (Texas)	\$61,983,103	\$241,732,386

California. As indicated in Table 2, California received the highest funding amount of ESSER I and II funding. The state required LEAs to submit Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) addendum for ESSER I funds. The LCAP is a critical

part of the state's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) which focus on eight state priority areas. Each LCAP plan had to demonstrate how the district's budget will help achieve the goals, and assess each year how well the strategies in the plan were able to improve outcomes. As a part of the process each school district was required to engage parents, educators, employees and the community to establish these plans. The plans describe the school district's overall vision for students, annual goals and specific actions the district will take to achieve the vision and goal.

Both districts we reviewed for this analysis included a community engagement process in an alignment with their LCAP processes and thus, not only received the funds, both districts also participating in a process that engaged stakeholders. Furthermore, one of the stated State priorities centered around parent involvement. In this case, the local community is engaged in the decision-making process and the educational programs of students. With this guidance both the Los Angeles Unified School District and the Fresno Unified School District, developed a process that provided input for deciding how to use both ESSER I and ESSER II funds. In review of the publicly available material, Fresno Unified School District also included stakeholder engagement material that focused on providing information and assistance to parents and families on how they can effectively support students, including in a distance learning environment.

Texas. As noted above, the state of Texas had the second largest amount of funding for ESSER I and II. In reviewing publicly available material for the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the state agency provided background on ESSER I and II funding - including authorization information, district allocations, reporting, compliance information, frequently asked questions and offered a side-by-side overview of the ESSERs requirements. As an optional tool, but not required, the TEA

offered a tab on its website to a tool entitled “An ESSER Planning Resource.” A component of the tool included a tab on empowering parents. Upon review of the tab, the tool linked to the organization that developed the resource. While the tool offers support to districts for engaging parents, we did not identify any policy guidance or directive for engaging families and/or communities in the process of allocating ESSERs I and II funds.

As part of the review for Texas, we also reviewed publicly available data for Houston and Dallas Independent School Districts. Upon our review, in Houston the district provided a number of resources including dashboards on spending by strategic committees. The district also provided information on its’ Title I, Part A Parent Engagement Plan and the Family and Community Engagement Department also known as FACE. The district provided the public notice and notice for comments on ESSER funds. However, our review did not identify information surrounding guidance or requirements for engagement of families or communities on the use of ESSER funding.

In Dallas Independent School District, as noted on the websites, because the funds had already been spent at the time of this review, little information was provided around the guidance of the use of ESSER I funds. The district did provide extensive guidance around the ESSER II, including priorities for spending and how the funds are currently being targeted (please see <https://www.dallasisd.org/esser>). Upon review, we did not find guidance nor the requirement of community and family engagement as part of the process for deciding how these funds are to be used. While our review did not disclose a process for community or family engagement for ESSER II funds, for ESSER III, the district entered in a significant stake-

holder engagement process. Although ESSER III was not part of our original research question, we note that the district engaged multiple parties as a part of the process for determining how best to use the ESSER III funds. The process included outreach to stakeholders through public town halls, parent surveys, and a task force. Our review on ESSER III, did not uncover any policy guidance requiring outreach but stated the district intent to embark on this outreach.

New York. In New York, the New York State Education Department provided guidance, toolkits, frequently asked questions and other material for LEAs when deciding how to make decisions around the use of ESSER I and II funds. The state also provided statutory background around ESSER and identified the intent of the funds. In review of public documents the state did not provide guidance surrounding community or family engagement in the decision making process. The state also included language intending to foster engagement.

Specifically, NYSED stated,

“An LEA must engage in meaningful consultation with stakeholders and give the public an opportunity to provide input in the development of its plan. Specifically, an LEA must engage in meaningful consultation with students; families; school and district administrators (including special education administrators); and teachers, principals, school leaders, other educators, school staff, and their unions. Additionally, an LEA must engage in meaningful consultation with each of the following, to the extent present in or served by the LEA: Tribes; civil rights organizations (including disability rights organizations); and stakeholders representing the interests of children with disabilities, English learners, children experiencing homelessness, children in foster care, migratory students, children who are incarcerated, and other underserved students.”

While our review did not uncover any additional guidance documents on community and family engagement, specifically, in the decision-making process, the state's inclusion of the language in the application process serves as an example on policy. Presumably, both New York City Public Schools and Buffalo City Schools included the required engagement comment as a part of the application for ESSER I and II funds. In New York City Public Schools, the district included in the application process language that stated that the LEA must consult with stakeholders. However, the guidance was unclear as to the definition of consult and at what stage of the process should the LEA consult with stakeholders, which slightly differs from the language included in the state's application. As for Buffalo City Schools, according to publicly available documents the district included an engagement component that centered around a survey to the community.

Florida. In Florida, after reviewing publicly available documents there was no evidence that the state education agency provided guidance to LEAs on community and family engagement for the purpose of making decisions around ESSER I and/or II funds. Unfortunately, due to the timing of our review and analysis, Miami-Dade Public Schools did not provide great details surrounding the process it used for ESSER I as the funds had already been obligated. However, the publicly available information provided an overview of the work that was funded by ESSER I dollars. According to published documentation, the district was in the middle of a strategic planning process when COVID occurred. As a result, the district utilized the data collected from the many focus groups, hearings and surveys that had been completed to identify and advance priority areas. The district then provided additional feedback from stakeholders as it advanced spending plans for ESSER II and III.

In review of the publicly available information on the Broward County Public Schools website, the district has a school-based management process for budgeting. As a result of this process, the district held budget workshops for parents and community. In review of board minutes, the school board also engaged in hearings and comments surrounding the budget.

Illinois. In Illinois, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has provided a number of guidance documents according to our review. Our review uncovered a data dashboard on spending, allocation, information for districts, webinars for the public, fact sheets, frequently asked questions (FAQs) and shared guidance, including letters to State Superintendent of Schools, from the U.S. Department of Education. After reviewing application material, our review noticed one question in the application that asked the LEA to describe how it will determine needs for the school as well as how the funds will be used to support those needs. The question offer space for an LEA to describe a process for engaging communities. However, the language does not provide policy guidance to districts to engage communities or families in the allocation of funds process.

In Chicago, the Chicago Public Schools developed an initiative entitled Moving Forward. The initiative is centered in the context aligned with an effort by former Mayor Rahm Emanuel. The initiatives centers around key priorities to engage communities around decision making. In the case of ESSER funds, the initiative incorporated the ESSER funding into previously established processes. The process included incorporating feedback from stakeholders by providing local school communities the flexibility and resources needed to enact local, responsive plans or strategies. While our review did not uncover a policy, there was evidence of an

overarching practice of stakeholder engagement across governmental organizations.

In Rockford Public Schools, our time found little information surrounding the process for determining how ESSER I and II funds. Our review uncovered the priorities for the funding and also we discovered the creation of the community initiative that will be paid for by the ESSER funds. However, our review did not uncover policy guidance that promoted community and/or family engagement as a part of the process for determining how ESSERs I and II funds were to be used.

Discussion

We selected the focus of school, community and family engagement, because community and family engagement has been a powerful influence on student learning.

Difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality. While parent engagement research has become well known across education circles, in practice, many school-based efforts to engage parents default to an outmoded set of deficit-based strategies to “fix” parents (Olivos, 2006). Consequently, because of past relationships with schools, the power dynamics of schools, communities and parents remain at the forefront of any attempt to engage undeserved and high poverty communities who have been most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As one Ishimaru (2022) stated educators and systems often regard racially minoritized youth and their families as deficient, problematic, resistant, or “disengaged.” Furthermore the research supports that similar issue exist across non-Hispanic white and rural communities of poverty (Carr and Kafalas, 2009, Irvin et al 2011).

Roots and development of policies. In Richard Rothstein's 2004 book, *Class and Schools*, he suggests that we tend to provide weaker education in highly impoverished schools and that the major claims about successful reforms in these schools are wrong. Moreover, Rothstein argues that it is unrealistic to expect to change schools in any deep way without dealing with some of the issues that arise with poverty (Rothstein, 2004). Recent evidence suggests that links between family income and child development may vary across urban, suburban, and rural areas as differences in resources and stressors across urbanity in the U.S. may alter the way poverty shapes academic development (Miller et al 2019). For example, the availability of resources that are particularly salient to disadvantaged populations, such as food banks and welfare offices, also appear lower in rural and suburban communities than in urban ones (Allard 2004, 2008; Murphy and Wallace 2010). The hardships faced by poor children are often compounded because they are more likely than their advantaged counterparts to live in economically disadvantaged, chaotic, and under resourced communities (Bischoff and Reardon, 2014). This research seem to suggest that students of poverty tend to benefit the least from education systems. As a result, educators and policy makers need to examine the assumptions that underlie their approaches to working with families experiencing poverty. As Ishimaru (2020) discussed, there is simply no evidence that families of color are less concerned for their children or their education than white parents. Neither does the family of a poor white rural student care any less. In truth, students across poverty categories bring a range of strengths and assets into a learning environment, although those strengths may not be conceptualized as such (Milner, 2015). Furthermore, Yosso (2013) expands the notion of leveraging social capital to improve outcomes for students by including additional capital termed "community cultural wealth" that is developed and nurtured in communities of color, and include aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital.

While forms of capital are acquired by individuals, cultural wealth is meant to be shared within a community (Yosso, 2013).

Distribution of power, resources, and knowledge. Moreover, the lack of policy conditions are even more troubling as the education circle targets mitigation of the pandemic on student learning as research shows that high levels of achievement among poor children are generally made possible through organized cooperation between teachers and parents (Ladson-Billings, 1994). What's more there is also ample evidence that schools serving large populations of students of color and students living in poverty have historically been the least successful at such engagement (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Bryk & Schneider 2002; Epstein & Sanders 2006, Olivos 2012).

Social stratification, inequality, and privilege. From our review we determined that several districts are finding or have found ways to interact with families, communities and other stakeholders through the ESSER process. However, much of the interaction was built on creating opportunities for feedback to the plans that were already developed. The feedback was gathered by way of community meetings, opportunities to speak at board meetings or opportunities to respond during public comment periods of developed plans. In some cases, districts held focus groups, surveyed community stakeholders, and even listed a section for community comments or included an input form on their websites. There were examples of practices underway that leveraged existing efforts to engagement communities. There were examples of practice, (e.g. Chicago Public Schools) in which the effort to engage parents, communities and other stakeholders appeared to be a massive and in-

tentional undertaking. However, those examples were few. We saw very little evidence of high-level policy guidance that promoted true collaboration of communities and/or families in the ESSER allocation process.

How non dominant groups resist and engage in policy efforts. At the state level, many of the states we examined followed guidance from the U.S. Department of Education that centered around engagement. In doing so, several of the state education agencies we reviewed incorporated language in the LEA application that asked for stakeholder engagement. It was unclear from those examples as to how the state defined stakeholder engagement outside of the federal guidance. However, even with the inclusion of this language in the LEA application and other resources, we saw little evidence of policy guidance that promoted true collaborative engagement by definition of our study.

Conclusion

Our findings highlight the complexities of each state and district approach to implementing federal policy. In particular, the approach to federal policy that in itself is meant to mitigate the impact of a catastrophic event. The history of practices mattered greatly from our review as states and districts rarely deviated from past practice. These institutions used already determined processes that, at most, asked for feedback on already determined actions. In this article, we argue that the federal policy around stakeholder engagement cannot be divorced from societal issues including social power dynamics that exist between school systems and communities of poverty. Specifically, we call attention to the interpretation and implementation of a stakeholder engagement federal policy meant to engage communities after a once in a generation pandemic. As noted, historically schools have not done an effective job of engaging communities and families of underserved students or

communities of poverty, despite the research that supports the need to do so. Certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for states, schools and districts on many levels. However, the data bears out that the pandemic impacted underserved and poor communities the greatest. With the knowledge of the impact community and family engagement has on school; as well as the policy around engagement of the large infusion of federal funding designed to mitigate the impact of COVID, there was a greater opportunity to reimagine what community and family engagement may look like for schools and districts, serving underserved and high poverty communities. Even with political challengers of past reform efforts, educators across the field can all agree that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning. The approved large funding amounts is evidence of societal agreement around the potential impact of the pandemic. As a result, we argue that the language in the stakeholder engagement policy is designed to promote effective collaboration with communities. Furthermore, we argue that the misinterpretation of the policy has led to ineffective practice resulting in underserved and communities of poverty continuing to be left out due to inequitable embedded structures.

As we have continued to learn more about its' impact, COVID-19 unequivocally disrupted learning disproportionately in underserved communities (Smith, 2023). For many the disruptions has led to calls for a renewal in what the future of education may look like. As researchers, our argument is that the future of allocating resources for education should also include engagement of communities and families. Certainly, those communities hit the hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic should be engaged in how public federal resources should be used to support recovery of students from those same communities. Particularly when many interactions with communities include parent involvement programs which typically adopt a race-neutral perspective, and in doing so, expect parents of color to take on

the conceptual models of White, middle-class families—essentially requiring parents of color to assimilate to a Eurocentric school culture in order to participate in their children’s education (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Cooper, 2009; Crozier, 2001; Levine-Rasky, 2009); or, schools in the case of rural America, that are disproportionately white, and that face similar disadvantages in terms of poverty and test performance (Logan and Burdick-Will, 2017).

In closing, while federal policy has been inclusive to add language around stakeholder engagement, more must be done. Given a substantial body of research on school improvement places a strong emphasis on capacity building and school contexts and as Harris (2011) underscores the importance of deliberate, purposeful, and targeted capacity building for the realization of change initiated - establishing equitable collaboration around resources for recovery or even school improvement is necessary. Moreover, without such capacity can preclude schools from sustaining continuous school improvement efforts that result in improved student outcomes (Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001).. As such we are left with what Derrick Bell, examining the “unfilled hopes of racial reform” (2004, p. 185). Particularly, as it relates to structures whose inequitable, inadequate distribution across lines of poverty and race have been well documented (Oakes 2002). With the context of this policy centering around the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the context could not have been more dire. There is significant evidence here for further consideration of inequalities that exist across communities and the federal, state, and local educational context for making policy around resource allocation decisions that will have compelling impact on local context.

Notes

ⁱ See The U.S. Department of Education's (ED, 2021) form for SEAs and LEAs to document their ESSER spending, which may set implicit expectations around priorities: academic (e.g., assessment, extended learning time, and tutoring), social and emotional learning (e.g., community schools, mental health supports, and SEL curricula), and safety and operations (e.g., reopening, education technology, professional development on remote learning or reopening, data infrastructure).

<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/04/22/2021-08359/american-rescue-plan-act-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund>

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