

# Returning to School: Transitioning from Juvenile Justice Placement to Community Education in Oakland County, MI

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Schools are often the first opportunity to intervene if children exhibit inappropriate or anti-social behaviors; likewise, schools are a necessary partner to prevent recidivism after youth have entered the juvenile justice system. It is imperative that reentry initiatives include strategies to design a continuum of care that prioritizes the educational needs of youth as they transition from juvenile justice facilities to community education settings.

Nationally, two-thirds of youth placed in juvenile facilities do not return to school after they are released (Hooks Wayman and Nellis, 2009). Research suggests that effective transitional programs will increase students' rates of reenrollment in school, high school graduation rates, and success in independent living and employment (NRRC, 2011).

Investing in education also makes good fiscal sense. Students who drop out of school earn less, pay fewer taxes, and are more likely to collect public assistance or become involved in crime. On the other hand, increasing male graduation rates by only 10 percent would result in \$560 million annual crime savings and earnings in Michigan, including almost \$350 million in reduce crime costs alone (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids *Michigan*, 2008).

## Barriers to Educational Reentry

There is a growing effort to address underlying causes of truancy and suspension, but little attention is paid to the educational needs of youth after they have experienced detention or incarceration. Research reveals a number of systemic barriers that prevent a seamless transition back into educational system when youth return home:

**School discipline policies may contribute to exclusion from school.** The growing trend to criminalize problem behaviors, referred to as the 'school-to-prison pipeline,' is characterized by the increased use of zero-tolerance discipline, school-based arrests, disciplinary alternative schools, and secure detention (Gonsoulin, Zablocki, & Leone, 2012; Hirschfield, 2008; Kim & Geronimo, 2009). Most school districts are permitted to refuse student admission based on the nature of offense or history of suspension, expulsion, or truancy. School policies often allow administrators to challenge re-enrollment for youth leaving detention if they are considered difficult to manage, or because it would affect academic or safety performance goals.

**Schools do not have an obligation to reinstate a student or provide alternative education.** Although Michigan’s Compulsory Education Law requires school attendance for children ages six through eighteen<sup>1</sup>, school districts are not responsible for establishing alternative education programs if students are suspended or expelled. This problem is compounded when students return to communities outside of their home school district. Ultimately, the responsibility rests with the family to arrange alternative education, even if alternative schools are not available in the local school district. Among a group of 1,975 students who had been suspended or expelled during the 2006-2007 school year, 46% noted that they did not receive alternative education services during their absence from school (CEPI, 2008).

**Youth in the juvenile justice system are not necessarily afforded the same educational protections** that are in place for foster youth, homeless youth, or students with disabilities via the McKinney Vento Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that youth in juvenile justice are frequently decertified from special education, especially if the parents are not proactive about requesting an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Even then, children with learning or emotional needs are particularly likely to be excluded from school, despite the heightened protections afforded to them under law.

**Educational barriers disproportionately impact youth of color.** African-American students are far more likely than their white peers to be suspended, expelled, or arrested for the same kind of misconduct at school (ACLU of Michigan, 2009). African-American students with disabilities are three times more likely to receive short-term suspensions than

their white counterparts, and are more than four times as likely to end up in correctional facilities.

**Educational goals in facilities may not be aligned with the educational goals in schools.** Students are required to participate in educational services while in residential placement; however, credits accumulated while in residential placement may not always transfer to the home school district. Additionally, national trends indicate that youth who enter juvenile justice placements are often “tracked” into GED programs, as opposed to high school diploma programs.

In reality, there are hundreds of different reasons that kids may not return to school. This brief highlights strategies to address the reasons that prevent and facilitate reentry to community education based on input from stakeholders in Oakland County, Michigan.

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<sup>1</sup> New Michigan statute raises the age of compulsion education from 16 to 18, beginning with the class of 2016.

## Oakland County Youth Reentry Initiative: Promoting Educational Success

Awarded a U.S. Department of Justice Second Chances grant in October 2010, the Oakland County Department of Health and Human Services, in collaboration with state and local stakeholders, implemented youth reentry at two facilities, Children’s Village and Crossroads for Youth. [Note: This brief primarily focuses on Children’s Village.] The initiative was the first in the state to pilot the Michigan Youth Reentry Model, a comprehensive framework to support the reentry needs of local juvenile justice systems.<sup>2</sup>

The Oakland County Youth Reentry Initiative focused on 132 youth, males and females between 12-17 years old, who are returning to various communities across Oakland County after participating in residential treatment. Youth were assigned to residential treatment by the court for a variety of offense types. [See Table 1]

Each young person was assigned to work with a collaborative case management team, generally consisting of a probation caseworker, youth assistance caseworker, systems navigator, facility case coordinator, public health nurse, family, and youth. Together, the team developed strategies to support the students’ education success in the facility, during transition, and throughout aftercare.

Although outcome data on the reentry cohort are not yet available, members of the collaborative case management teams have provided helpful insight about how various

<sup>2</sup> The Michigan Youth Reentry Model was developed in 2009 by the Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency in partnership with the Michigan Department of Human Services Bureau of Juvenile Justice.

stakeholders can support youth reentry at each step in the process, beginning the first day in the facility.

Charges Among All CV Students	2010
Drug Related Offenses	21
Public Order Offenses	186
Order into Custody after Failing Community-Based Supervision	293
Youth with Family/School Offense	77
Alcohol Related Offenses	13
Crimes Against Persons (CSC, Robbery, Assault)	188
Crimes Against Property (Burglary, Arson, Fraud)	111
Children in Need of Protection	268

Table 1

### Children’s Village School: Prioritizing Education from Day One

Children’s Village School (CVS) falls within the Waterford School District and has the capacity to serve students in Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Over the course of the 2010-2011 school year, Children’s Village School served 697 unduplicated youth.<sup>3</sup> The recidivism rate during the school year was 13% while the recidivism rate for the full calendar year was 34%.

<sup>3</sup> All statistics about Children’s Village School are from a CVS presentation dated June 7, 2011.

Approximately 53% of youth identified as African American; 40% identified as Caucasian; 5% identified as Hispanic; and >1% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander. The population was 70% male and 30% female.

Among the 132 youth in the reentry cohort, over half (71 youth) were located within four cities: Pontiac (26%), Hazel Park (7%), Southfield (7%), and Waterford (10%). Notably, these same school districts have the highest rates of free and reduced lunch when compared with the county average.

The population included a high proportion with significant mental health concerns. In total, 35% of youth at Children’s Village were receiving psychotropic medications.

<b>Diagnoses Among All CV Students</b>	<b>2010-2011</b>
Emotionally Impaired (EI)	48%
Learning Disabled (LD)	35%
Other Health Impairment	13%
Cognitively Impaired (CI)	1%
Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)	N/A
Speech & Language (SLI)	2%
Dual Certifications	1%

Table 2

CVS is designed to deliver quality education in a safe environment, while accommodating the unique characteristics of its student body. They have 21 teachers and 15 teaching assistants, offering a low teacher-student ratios for the 12-15 students per class. Students also have access to counselors, social workers and a psychologist along with district resources such as physical therapists,

occupational therapists, and speech therapists. Classrooms are organized to separate girls and boys.

### Assessment

One of the most important aspects of reentry is effectively assessing a student’s educational level. Research compiled by the National Reentry Resource Center indicates that many youth in the juvenile justice system are developmentally behind their peers, and are more likely to have learning disabilities. More than half of high school-aged youth in detention have not completed 8<sup>th</sup> grade (Hooks Wayman and Nellis, 2009). Some estimates place the percentage of youth involved in the juvenile justice system who have a learning disability as high as 70 percent (Hooks Wayman and Nellis, 2009).

All students at CVS are treated individually as they are assessed and placed according to their educational needs and goals. When youth arrive, an educational assessment is conducted using the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT), the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement, and the Woodcock–Johnson Test of Cognitive Abilities. Youth are re-tested every ninety days in accordance with Title I-D requirements.

Consistent with national trends of youth in the juvenile justice system (NRRC, 2012), CVS students lagged behind their peers educationally, with 63% scoring below grade level in reading and 90% scoring below grade level in math upon arrival. Over half of CVS students were behind more than three grade levels. Fortunately, by the end of a stay at Children’s Village, 81% of students improved scores by at least one grade level.

### Academic Programs

Students earn high school credits while attending CVS, completing a curriculum that is compliant with the Michigan Merit

Curriculum. CVS also offers math and reading labs and summer school in July for half credit. Credit recovery is offered through PLATO© Learning, an on-line system which offers twenty courses for half credits. The students' school files (CA-60 files) are typically not present at the point of admission but the counselor and office manager require current IEP's, transcripts and grades. During CVS placement, previously earned credits are requested.

### **Special Education**

Special education students participate in an inclusionary model which integrates them into regular classrooms. Goals and objectives are reviewed annually, and all special education laws and procedures are strictly adhered to with each eligible student. Families are kept aware of progress and supports that will be needed when their child transitions back into the home district. CVS supports the current Michigan Protection and Advocacy Services priorities in Educational Advocacy:

- Students will be identified and evaluated for special education;
- Eligible students at risk of discipline due to disability related behavior will remain in school;

- Transition needs from post education to community living will be identified and addressed.

### **General Education Development (GED)**

CVS encourages traditional education when it is possible and makes sense. Students that are not on track to complete a traditional diploma may consider taking General Educational Development (GED) tests, a rigorous group of five subject tests which, when passed, certify that the student has high-school level academic skills. While CVS does not offer GED support during school hours, students are allowed to work on GED Preparation after school.

### **Student Recognition**

Student recognition is an important element within the learning environment. Students receive positive behavior slips as well as 'Golden Apple' certificates for behavior above and beyond expectations. Students who participate in community service projects are rewarded with pizza parties. Several students have had the opportunity to join the Village Voyagers male basketball team as well as female volleyball team.

## What is Title I, Part D?

*Federal Funding for Prevention and Intervention Programs for Children and Youth who are Neglected, Delinquent or At-Risk*

In 2002, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, also known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), was signed into law, with the mandate to "close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind." Title I, Part D, of ESEA, also called *The Prevention and Intervention Programs for Children and Youth who are Neglected, Delinquent or At-Risk*, provides financial assistance to educational programs for youth in State-operated institutions or community day programs. The program also provides financial assistance to support school districts' programs involving collaboration with locally operated correctional facilities.

The goals of Title I, Part D, are to: (1) improve educational services for these children so they have the opportunity to meet challenging State academic content and achievement standards; (2) provide them with services to successfully transition from institutionalization to further schooling or employment; and (3) prevent youth who are at-risk from dropping out of school, and to provide dropouts and children and youth returning from correctional facilities with a support system to ensure their continued education.

(Excerpted from the National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth who are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk:

<http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/nd/aboutus/background.asp>)

## Returning to School: Reentry and Community Education

As the youth prepares to leave the structured environment at Children's Village, the collaborative case management team works with the youth and family to navigate the pathway back to school. It is imperative that each transition plan is designed with the students' unique educational needs in mind.

### Transitional Support

The team first creates a transition plan, which includes steps for returning to a community education setting, whether

public school, alternative education, adult education, GED preparation or vocational training.

Because multiple systems are involved in the transition process, information-sharing becomes incredibly important; still, the team is careful to protect private and confidential information by procuring all necessary Release of Information forms and only sharing relevant and necessary information with the returning school.

Since the responsibility of school enrollment falls to the parent or guardian, it is important to engage and empower families so they know how to enroll their child, form a relationship with someone at the school, and partner in supporting school expectations. Through the

youth reentry process, families were assisted by two key members of the collaborative case management team, Youth Assistance and Systems Navigators.

### **Youth Assistance**

Youth Assistance (YA) is a tri-sponsorship between the Oakland Circuit Court-Family Division, School Districts, and Municipalities. Traditionally, YA has provided prevention services, such as family-centered counseling and referrals, for young people, 17 years of age and younger and their families, who live or attend school in Oakland County. Beyond casework, YA provides family education, mentoring, skill building, recreation, after-school programs, camping, youth recognition and service learning opportunities. Their role in the Oakland County Youth Reentry Initiative is to apply their expertise in prevention services to youth returning to the community, with the goal of preventing recidivism.

Because YA is financially supported by each of Oakland County's twenty-six school districts, YA Caseworkers assume primary reentry responsibilities as liaison between schools and the court. YA Caseworkers are responsible for attending discharge hearings a month prior to release, and subsequently prepare the families to re-enroll their student. Their activities vary with each case, such as visiting the school, meeting with the special education director, or assisting parents to request for a special education assessment.

### **OLHSA Systems Navigators**

For the first two years of the Oakland County Youth Reentry Initiative, Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency (OLHSA) was selected as the youth reentry service provider. As youth prepared to return home, OLHSA's Reentry staff expertly provided direct reentry services and service linkages to

address housing, workforce development, transportation, substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, healthcare, family support, life skills, education, domestic violence, faith-based supports, victim services, and public benefits. In particular, Systems Navigators worked in collaboration with YA Caseworkers to support the educational transition by assisting families with re-enrollment, credit recovery, and documents if the youth had been suspended or expelled. Reentry staff also coordinated community-based tutoring, educational enhancement, after-school study table, and referrals to vocational training.

### **Aftercare: Succeeding in Community Education**

The Oakland County Youth Reentry Initiative utilized a wealth of resources available through Oakland Schools to support the long-term educational needs of youth. Through Schools of Choice alternative high schools, and community-wide truancy prevention efforts, students are encouraged to find an environment that best suits their learning needs.

### **Schools of Choice**

Established in 1996, school-of-choice programs throughout Michigan allow parents to send their children to a public school outside of their home district, provided the home district and district of choice both approve the transfer. Nearly twenty school districts in Oakland County participate in schools-of-choice.

### **Alternative Schools**

Oakland County has over thirty alternative education programs for high school students. Alternative schools are needs-based and help students with specialized instruction, innovative teaching techniques and working

through the issues that caused educational disruptions in the past.

Alternative schools typically have smaller class sizes, individualized instruction, flexible scheduling, alternative attendance and grading policies, along with student engagement in making rules and other decisions. Many alternative high schools also have connections to community colleges or dual enrollment agreements with higher education institutions in the area.

### **Truancy, Suspensions and Expulsions**

Established in 2005, the Oakland County Truancy Task Force was formed to combat school truancy following the 3 A's model: Attendance + Attachment = Achievement.

Their focus on attendance is critical, given its strong protective factor against delinquency; youth who attend school are much less likely to commit crime in the short term and over their lifetimes. Conversely, youth are more likely to drop out if suspended repeatedly, have been expelled for any period of time, or have been retained in a grade below their age-level peers.<sup>4</sup> Eighty-eight percent of all high school dropouts who do not receive at least their GED will be incarcerated by the time they are 25, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

Students who have been expelled prior to placement present the greatest challenge for re-enrollment because they need to attend a reinstatement hearing to return to their home district. In some districts, reinstatement hearings are only scheduled a few times a year.

Staff report that, at times, the school which initiated the expulsion won't "start the clock" until the youth is about to return to the community, meaning that the time elapsed while a youth was in placement was not

counted toward the length of the expulsion (typically 90 days for elementary students and 180 days for secondary students). Children's Village Case Coordinators often contact the home school district as soon as the youth enters CVS to find out the status of an expulsion and ensure that the "clock" has started.

### **Safe School Healthy Students**

One of the most promising efforts to support educational reentry is the Waterford school district's Safe Schools Healthy Students program. Created in 1999, the initiative was a response to rising concerns about youth violence and school safety. Safe Schools Healthy Students, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Department of Justice, built partnerships across systems to collaboratively find solutions for school safety, substance abuse prevention, mental health awareness, behavioral supports, and positive youth development.

A primary goal was to support at-risk students and keep them connected to school. To achieve this goal, they created the position of Juvenile Justice Transition Liaison. The liaison served as a link between Waterford Schools and the Oakland County Circuit Court, working directly with students and families involved in the juvenile justice system.

When students transitioned to Waterford Schools after residential placement, the liaison would participate in reentry meetings and provide ongoing support after the return to school. Both Systems Navigators and Youth Assistance Caseworkers reported that the Juvenile Justice Transition Liaison was a tremendous benefit to a seamless transition. Although the position has recently been eliminated, it provides a strong model for working collaboratively across systems.

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<sup>4</sup> National Center for Educational Statistics

## Critical Elements for a Seamless and Successful Educational Transition

Through the course of implementing youth reentry, Oakland County stakeholders identified several important themes that support a smooth transition to community education, including:

- I. Create a student-driven education plan for each youth based on a strength-based assessment of the youth's educational skills, interests, and aspirations.
- II. Match youth to the right educational setting and level.
- III. Facilitate information sharing of educational records, while protecting confidentiality.

- IV. Create safe and welcoming educational environments.
- V. Create a long-term plan for success in aftercare and beyond.

Based on each theme, stakeholders offered recommendations (listed on the following pages) that can be implemented by youth and families, facilities, courts, youth assistance, schools, and policymakers.

Above all, a seamless reentry to school requires partnerships across all systems to identify areas that could be strengthened through cooperation, collaboration and communication. Stakeholders at all levels must be engaged in a process that integrates different perspectives while always focusing on student success.

**I. Create a student-driven education plan for each youth based on a strength-based assessment of the youth’s educational skills, interests, and aspirations.**

<p><b>Youth and families should...</b></p>	<p><b>Actively participate in developing a reentry plan</b> that supports the student’s educational goals, outlines academic responsibilities, and articulates school expectations.</p>
<p><b>Facilities should...</b></p>	<p><b>Prepare an educational exit plan</b> that includes grades and credits earned, classes taken, scores on standardized assessments, IEP, if applicable, examples of the student’s work, and all other information about the academic progress the youth has made while in placement.</p>
<p><b>Courts should...</b></p>	<p><b>Create a central point of contact, such as an education-focused probation specialist,</b> to ensure that youth are accepted back into school prior to release from jurisdiction.</p>
<p><b>Schools should...</b></p>	<p><b>Create a central point of contact, such as a school-based court liaison,</b> to facilitate pre-release visits and admission interview, oversee credit transfers, and initiate academic counseling within weeks of re-enrolling in school. This person, or other school personnel, should engage in reentry planning, as appropriate.</p>
<p><b>Youth Assistance should...</b></p>	<p><b>Actively participate in transition meetings prior to release</b> and identify community-based resources that support the youth’s educational goals, such as tutoring or mentoring.</p>
<p><b>Policy makers should...</b></p>	<p><b>Develop a Michigan-specific toolkit</b> and trainings to assist courts and schools identify and implement best practices effectively transition youth back to school (MacArthur Foundation, 2010). The toolkit should cover a variety of topics, such as ‘how to request a special education assessment, Know Your Rights in school, and overcoming challenges with school-based offenses or prior suspensions/expulsions.’</p>

## II. Match youth to the right educational setting and level

<p><b>Youth and families should...</b></p>	<p><b>Become familiar with the procedures for requesting a special education assessment or IEP meeting.</b> Keeping Special Education designations in place will help assure a smooth transition. Ideally, a new IEP would be prepared before school starts; however, that is not necessarily school policy.</p>
<p><b>Facilities should...</b></p>	<p><b>Have candid conversations to learn about the students' goals,</b> hopes, anxieties, concerns, and fears about returning to a community education setting. It is important to recognize that youth who have been in placement for extended periods of time, sometimes years, may need additional support when transitioning to a traditional classroom setting.</p>
<p><b>Courts should...</b></p>	<p><b>Establish realistic reentry goals</b> and explore the best fit based on the student's educational needs, strengths, and goals. For a variety of reasons, some students fare better when they return to a school outside of their home school district. While many students could benefit from alternative schools or adult education, it is important to become familiar with the differing policies on admissions.</p>
<p><b>Schools should...</b></p>	<p><b>Identify the need for special accommodations</b> as early as possible. This could be achieved by engaging special education staff in transition planning.</p>
<p><b>Youth Assistance should...</b></p>	<p><b>Identify local resources</b> for GED and vocational training, especially if the receiving school does not offer these programs.</p>
<p><b>Policy makers should...</b></p>	<p><b>Explore the creation of treatment models</b> that can be used in educational settings, like day treatment, to ensure that options exist for students that need structure during their school day.</p>

**III. Facilitate information sharing of educational records,  
while protecting confidentiality.**

<b>Youth and families should...</b>	<b>Ask about the student's credits and educational status</b> , such whether the student has been classified for special education or has an individualized education plan. Youth can receive credit after 60 days of instruction in a facility, which should be transferred to a home school district upon release.
<b>Facilities should...</b>	<b>Facilitate the process for getting Releases of Information</b> from parents and school districts and begin pre-release information-sharing in a timely and secure manner.
<b>Courts should...</b>	<b>Consider the school calendar</b> when determining key aspects of the youth's educational transition. The best transitions into new schools often occur during natural school breaks. If the transition occurs in the middle of a semester, it may be helpful to arrange for a credit recovery program to bridge the gap.
<b>Schools should...</b>	<b>Use a consistent method for requesting and transferring educational records.</b>
<b>Youth Assistance should...</b>	<b>Contact the receiving school early and often</b> to ensure a smooth transition.
<b>Policy makers should...</b>	<b>Ensure policies and funding mechanisms are in place to support a student's return to school at any point during the school year.</b> Until 2011, the tuition of students returning to their local district past a certain Count Day would not have been reimbursed to the receiving district. This has recently changed and receiving schools now get a partial equivalent.

#### IV. Create safe and welcoming educational environments.

<p><b>Youth and families should...</b></p>	<p><b>Be engaged and supported throughout the transition</b> back to school. Students should take part in managing their own aftercare plans, complete with accountability steps for behavioral misconduct.</p>
<p><b>Facilities should...</b></p>	<p><b>Invite school personnel</b> who are involved in reentry planning by maintaining early and frequent contact with the school and scheduling transition meetings before or after school hours.</p>
<p><b>Courts should...</b></p>	<p><b>Establish clear incentives for positive behaviors and graduated sanctions for problem behaviors.</b> It is important to remember that by the time a student is adjudicated, he or she may have accumulated a long list of school problems, both academic and behavioral. If returning to the same school district, schools may be reticent to accept a student who had not benefited from school-based behavioral interventions.</p>
<p><b>Schools should...</b></p>	<p><b>Facilitate a Welcome Back meeting</b> so that they can help the student feel comfortable as well as express expectations. Students may face stigma because of residential placement so it is important that teachers lead by example in accepting the student and supporting him or her to comply with school rules.</p>
<p><b>Youth Assistance should...</b></p>	<p><b>Help students identify community supports</b> and mentors from their family, school, or neighborhood. Having positive adult support is critical to success.</p>
<p><b>Policy makers should...</b></p>	<p><b>Track the court referrals received from school districts</b> and identify opportunities to reduce school-based referrals through restorative justice, behavioral interventions, learning supports, teacher trainings, or community partnerships.</p>

## V. Create a long-term plan for success in aftercare and beyond

<p><b>Youth and families should...</b></p>	<p><b>Be accountable for ongoing communication with the court.</b> For example, a calendar with call-in dates or visits back to the facility puts the responsibility back on the youth. It also gives parents a chance to ask them if they are following through on their responsibilities.</p>
<p><b>Courts should...</b></p>	<p><b>Continue to monitor progress for at least six month</b> after returning to the community.</p>
<p><b>Schools should...</b></p>	<p><b>Provide career counseling</b> and establish short-term educational goals as steps toward his or her goals.</p>
<p><b>Youth Assistance should...</b></p>	<p><b>Work with families to make sure that transportation to and from school is safe and reliable.</b> If attending an alternative school or Schools of Choice, a student may be commuting far from home to attend school.</p>
<p><b>Policy makers should...</b></p>	<p><b>Collect and analyze data</b> as a means to refine the model and continuously improve outcomes related to educational reentry.</p>

For more information about the Michigan Youth Reentry Model, visit [www.miccd.org](http://www.miccd.org).

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