

TEXAS STUDENTS RISING

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Evolution Academy with
campuses in Beaumont,
Houston and Richardson, TX



TEXAS
PUBLIC
CHARTER
SCHOOLS
ASSOCIATION

There are nearly **800** public charter school campuses in Texas, serving nearly **365,000** students.



About *Texas Students Rising* Magazine

Texas Students Rising is a quarterly publication of the Texas Public Charter Schools Association (TPCSA) and is distributed to policymakers, elected officials, and community and business leaders throughout Texas.

TPCSA is committed to making sure every child in Texas has access to a high-quality public school that will set them on the path to future success. Our schools are preparing the workforce of the future and sending more students to and through colleges, universities, and technical training programs. Public charters are accountable to taxpayers and are doing their part to help the state meet its academic goals so that all Texas children can thrive.



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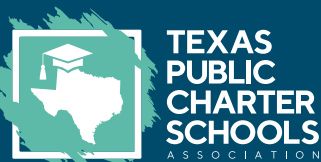
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You may have heard the provocative idea that government officials estimate the number of needed prison beds based on literacy rates. It's not exactly true, but the underlying theory—that students who struggle to read are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system—is. That's why early literacy is so important, especially for children from backgrounds who often fall through the cracks once they get into school.

In this issue of *Texas Students Rising*, we take a look at students on both ends of the education continuum: our littlest learners and students who got off track and dropped out, but have found their way back to school.

I am proud of the way public charter schools in Texas are serving both of these groups of students. A recent report found that public charter schools serve a higher percentage of three and four-year old students and that these littles are more likely to be ready for kindergarten when they finish a charter school pre-k program. Being kindergarten ready—especially being ready to learn to read effectively—is the most important academic building block to get right.

But not every student comes into school with a head start, and some struggle to find their footing. The Texas Education Agency recently analyzed data that shows that if a student falls behind in reading by third grade, he or she almost never gets caught up. Students who don't master basic reading skills by then are six times more likely to drop out of school—and a stunning eight times more likely to drop out if they are low-income children of color.

You don't need me to tell you how challenging a child's path is after dropping out of school. One of the most potent ways that charter schools complement ISDs is by bringing students who have dropped out back into the school system and giving them the support they need to finish high school. In fact, nearly 30,000 charter school students are previous high school dropouts. Many of these students are parents themselves, have been incarcerated, or are homeless. The flexibility offered to charter schools helps them develop programs that can help students overcome these hurdles.

In these pages, we introduce you to some incredible school leaders who are meeting these twin challenges of preparing our youngest students for success and getting our oldest students back on track. And you'll read stories of student's resilience and hope, like Bryant Scarlett's.

If you're as inspired by these educators as I am, please reach out. I'd be glad to set up an opportunity for you to visit a charter school in your community. You can contact me at scoleman@txcharterschools.org.

Starlee Coleman

Starlee Coleman

CEO, Texas Public Charter Schools Association

Texas Public Charter Schools Prepare Children for Kindergarten and Beyond

BY TIMOTHY MATTISON, Ph.D.

Excerpt from October 2021 research brief

Pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs help ensure that all children, regardless of their background, are prepared to thrive in kindergarten and beyond. Texas public charter schools play an outsized role in creating these educational opportunities. Pre-K enrollment at public charter schools is growing at a rate nearly quadruple that of traditional districts.

Nearly a quarter million students in Texas attend pre-K. From 2016 to 2020, pre-K enrollment at public charter schools increased by 40%, compared to 13% for the state as a whole.¹ Pre-K now accounts for 9% of all public charter school students and 4% of students enrolled in traditional school districts.²

Pre-K Type	Enrollment in 2016	Enrollment in 2020	% Increase
Public Charter School	13,714	19,213	40%
Traditional District	206,877	229,130	11%
Overall	220,591	248,343	13%

PERCENT OF BLACK PRE-K STUDENTS PREPARED FOR KINDERGARTEN



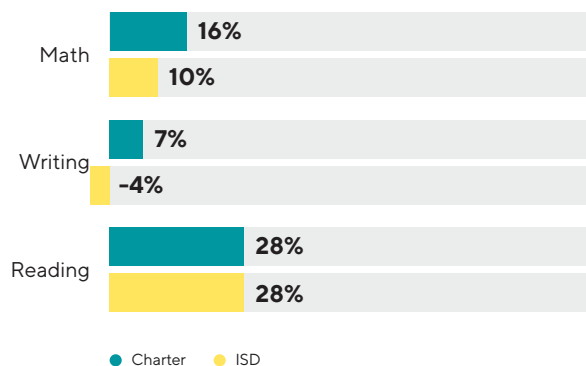
Black pre-K students at public charter schools finish their program prepared for kindergarten math at a rate 9% higher than their ISD peers. And they're not only prepared for kindergarten writing at a rate 8% higher, but fully 100% leave pre-K with the foundational skills they need.

PERCENT OF HOMELESS PRE-K STUDENTS PREPARED FOR KINDERGARTEN



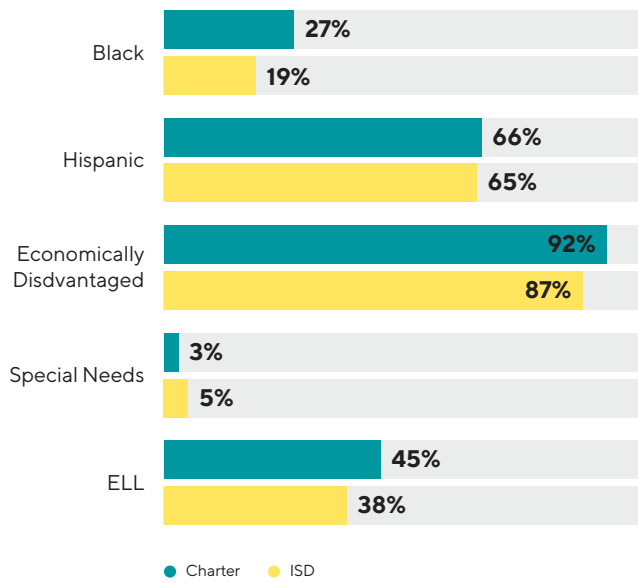
More **homeless pre-K students** at public charter schools finish their program ready for kindergarten—at a rate 10% higher in math, 8% higher in writing, and 8% higher in reading.

PRE-K STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES WHO PROGRESS FROM "NOT READY" TO "READY" FOR KINDERGARTEN



At public charter schools, 7% of **pre-K students with disabilities** progressed from "not ready" to "ready" for kindergarten writing. This is a clear need in the education system: At ISDs, the percentage of pre-K students with disabilities prepared for kindergarten writing *declined* by 4%. Public charter schools also helped a higher percentage of these students make progress toward readiness for kindergarten math (16% vs. 10%).

Enrollment in Pre-K Programs



PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS SERVE MORE HIGH-NEEDS STUDENTS

Texas public charter school pre-K programs enroll 8% more Black students, 5% more economically disadvantaged students, and 7% more English learners than traditional Independent School Districts (ISDs).

These differences are similar to those that exist overall between public charter schools and traditional public schools in grades K-12, with the exception of Hispanic students (who represent a higher percentage of public charter school students in grades that follow pre-K).³

The Faces of Charter School Pre-K Success



TARA HIGLEY: Last year, every pre-K student at Cedars Academy in Austin was from a low-income household—and every one emerged from the program prepared for kindergarten.

Tara Higley, a Cedars pre-K educator, shares her public charter school peers' convictions about "play with purpose." She explains that imaginative play helps her students develop language skills and makes them more likely to start experimenting with scientific concepts.

Ms. Higley believes in the power of students learning kinesthetically—remembering letters of the alphabet, for example, by associating them with "exciting facial expressions" and other movements.

At Cedars, educators focus on making students with disabilities feel safe and included. There are "peace corners" in every classroom, safe places where children who might get overstimulated can retreat. Pre-K teachers also have special toolboxes filled with objects that help give students sensory experiences that calm them down.



DIANA HARRIS: At Universal Academy in the Dallas area, nine out of 10 pre-K students are children of color and nearly half are learning English. Yet 100% complete their program prepared to hit the ground running in kindergarten.

"We must learn to prepare our early learners as thoroughly as we prepare college graduates," says Diane Harris, Founder, CEO, and Superintendent. "Universal Academy has used scientifically-based research strategies that have proven results infused with creative, interactive, child-centered, and fun activities which produce life-long learners."

Rallying to Get Kids Across the Finish Line

Evolution Academy Offers Second Chances

At Evolution Academy, school leaders work with community partners, local Independent School Districts, and higher education institutions to offer second chances to high school dropouts.

Cynthia Trigg understands the importance of mentors and opportunities.

During college, she was on course to get a degree in Political Science and then go on to law school. But, conversations with her advisor led Trigg to add a second major in Secondary Education—just in case.

Shortly after her graduation, an organization in Beaumont, TX posted an open teacher position; and another mentor of Trigg's, a retired teacher, encouraged her to give teaching a try.

Trigg was hired, and from there embarked on a journey that would take her from teacher to director of student activities to principal to CEO of a public charter school. She experimented with ways to challenge her students, most of whom society and other public schools had given up on, and helped them get into college. She realized her ability to connect with students, see beyond their circumstances, and guide them on their way to graduation and beyond.

Shortly into her career, Trigg noticed a trend: Many ninth grade classes started with approximately 1,000 students, but decreased in size by two-thirds by the time graduation day came. She began to ask herself: What's really happening to those kids who drop-out?

Some of the students who did not make it to graduation simply transferred to another school. Others were back at home—taking care of children or working full-time jobs, trying to find an environment that challenged and supported them. "They didn't believe school would get them anywhere, or help them reach their goals—and they just stopped attending," she said.

Believing she had a responsibility for these students, Trigg began exploring what would happen if students were provided flexibility, an understanding of how close they were to graduation, and assistance in identifying and addressing barriers to graduation.

In Texas an estimated 200,000 students drop out of high school annually. Without a high school diploma, former students are more likely to be unemployed, under-qualified for jobs, and will likely have lower lifetime earnings than Americans with high school diplomas. In 2002, Trigg founded Evolution Academy in Richardson, TX to help students who dropped out of high school re-enter and persist to graduation.

When Evolution Academy opened for enrollment, Trigg and her team anticipated 100 students enrolling to continue their education. Instead, they opened their doors to 252 students—and a number of students on a waiting list.

Working students, young parents, students experiencing homelessness or housing instability, and students who simply needed another option, all came to find out if Evolution Academy could help fill a void left by their previous schools. This affirmed for Trigg the need to address high school dropouts was real and it let her and her supporters know that, although their education was interrupted, students wanted to obtain their high school diplomas.

With year-round open enrollment, sometimes students arrive with five or six different high school transcripts that staff and teachers piece together to get a full view of how far the student has come and how much further they need to go. Offering a self-paced learning environment, students are able to complete the key components required to graduate without having to retake courses.

Evolution Academy staff work to give students a traditional high school experience. The school hosts a prom, graduation ceremony, and college tours. There are



Cynthia Trigg, Evolution Academy

jobs-oriented courses like medical billing and coding and video game design, and “adulting sessions” where students can learn practical life skills. Students who are interested in music careers can practice in the piano lab or earn time at the school’s music studio. Students who are ready to enter the workforce can obtain a food handler’s certification as part of the culinary arts program and get hands-on experience in the full-service cafeteria. In partnership with community colleges, students have the opportunity to earn dual credit for college courses.

Students are also provided with social and emotional support that Trigg says helps them “balance the humanness and reality” of their external situations. The road to a diploma is not linear for these students. Some find themselves stopping their education again, but there is a culture where students understand “you may leave, but whenever you do return, we’re going to welcome you. And we’re going to welcome you with open arms.” There is a lot of relationship-building and trust work involved,” Trigg said. “So many times they’ve been so disappointed and let down and they really think that you’re not in for the long haul.” But graduation is a promise Trigg makes to her students. And, Trigg said, “if we make promises, we keep them.”

Many of the students do come back—either on the campus where they started or online. And for many of the students who are having a hard time seeing success beyond their barriers, knowing there is a place that is dedicated to helping them graduate, matters.

Trigg said Evolution “gives students an opportunity to disconnect from what they know and get connected to something that’s totally different that could really change their life.”

Since the Richardson location’s opening in 2002, Evolution Academy has expanded, opening locations in Houston and Beaumont. Annually, all three campuses serve 1,600 students combined. There has been tremendous community effort to help support the schools’ success, too.

The city of Richardson helped Evolution secure a facility centrally located by the DART rail station. Students within a two-mile radius of the campus are provided free bus and train passes.

School leaders have built relationships with Richardson ISD and Houston ISD where counselors refer students



who have dropped out or may be at-risk of dropping out, and connect them with Evolution to reduce the educational time lost.

Volunteer health providers provide students with medical, emotional and vision care. The local food bank provides food for meals and culinary classes. In honor of Martin Luther King Jr. and community day of giving, volunteers from a local sorority join Evolution for an annual phone bank to make calls to students who have been missing class and re-engage them with staff.

Staff work to stay connected to what is happening in their students’ lives. If they know they’re moving to a location without an Evolution Academy, they work to get them connected and enrolled into another school. For students with household responsibilities, they visit them at their homes. For students having difficulty managing school and a full-time work schedule, staff visit them during their work lunch breaks.

Many students who graduate from Evolution Academy join the military or enroll in college, while others leverage their diploma and skills to obtain better career options. At a recent graduation ceremony, the keynote speaker was a previous Evolution student who shared how his teacher gave him a ride to enroll in college. That moment—when a teacher saw something in him and he realized he “had value and was worthy of saving”—motivated him to continue his college studies, get his doctorate, and become a pharmacist.

“Education is the greatest equalizer,” Trigg said. “When we are able to recover these students and get them to graduate, that’s helping the entire community to flourish.”

**In Texas an estimated
200,000 students
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school annually.**

Meeting Students Where They Are Leads to Their Success

Richard Milburn Academy Re-engages At-Risk Youth With Their Education



During an unpredictable time in education, Dr. Anderson remains committed to his calling. Dr. Armard Anderson, superintendent of schools for Richard Milburn Academy, is a man whose focus has always been the students. The Richard Milburn Academy (RMA) is a charter school focusing on dropout and credit recovery while upholding the goal of high school completion for all students. With nine campuses within Texas, Dr. Anderson and RMA serve approximately 2,000 high school students (of which 93% by TEA Standard are at risk) by offering an alternative and sometimes a second chance for students.

Dr. Anderson was born and raised in Fort Worth, Texas, where he grew up surrounded by a culture promoting friendship and family values. Dr. Anderson believes every child deserves an opportunity and a future and says he is acutely aware of all of the possible negative influences present for his own children, along with every student in today's society. At RMA, it is essential to offer support, encouragement, motivation, and commitment to every student in their academic endeavors.

Dr. Anderson's passion for a fair and equitable education for all children was uncovered while teaching business classes as a career and technology education (CTE) at a dropout recovery campus in Fort Worth. While providing instruction, Anderson found the students interested in business information, various stock market trade rules, and regulations. He realized that he could become a role model/mentor to offer advice and consistent support that could potentially impact the lives of his students.

At the Richard Milburn Academy, Dr. Anderson works to build a team invested in every student every day and gives them a second chance to prepare them for success. "My love is helping students caught between a rock and a hard place achieve their best life and live up to their potential," he says. "Our staff shows students that there's

more to life, and we try to guide them toward it."

Under Dr. Anderson's leadership, RMA Public Schools goes far beyond the academic support of its students. "One of our students had been homeless after her mother passed away and her father kicked her out," he said. "We were able to find a program that would work with her to provide shelter and assistance. She was successful in getting her diploma and was thankful that we believed in her when no one else did." This story is not unusual. "You can't focus on education until your basic needs are met," Dr. Anderson explained. When a recent salutatorian at a Richard Milburn Academy campus spoke at graduation, she said RMA had believed in her, while others hadn't seen her as an individual or invested in her success.

Dr. Anderson's secret? "We reengage students with their education by meeting them where they are and meeting their needs," he said, explaining that every student has individual needs. At RMA Public

Schools, we specialize in providing for each child. "Most students have an abundance of bad experiences without us adding to it; we focus on creating a positive experience, use ingenuity, and offer a wide variety of instructional strategies." RMA offers smaller classes, an average of 17 students per class, credit recovery, along with various individualized related services and accommodations. "We do this in a four-hour school day because many of our students work and have other responsibilities. We allow them to steer their fate because they are in the driver's seat."

At RMA Public Schools, staff understands that every student is different and does not fit into a perfectly created compartmentalized educational slot. "We do our best to meet the needs of our students, assist them with their academic and educational needs while helping them reach their goal of graduation and acquiring viable skill sets needed for their future," says Dr. Anderson.

"My love is helping students caught between a rock and a hard place achieve their best life and live up to their potential."

Teacher Returns to Alma Mater, Shows Students They Can Count on Their School

When El Paso Academy Social Studies teacher Albert Renteria talks to his students about the importance of earning a high school diploma, he speaks from firsthand experience. The 30-year-old educator dropped out of school at 15 years old. But he returned two months later to a new school, El Paso Academy, a public charter school and dropout recovery program.

As a high school student, Renteria says he reached out to his teachers after receiving failing grades and asked for support. They offered tutoring, which was no more than a repeat of the class lecture with a large group of other students. In other words, they took an approach that wasn't working and gave students more of it. Renteria says his confidence plummeted. "I wondered if I had a learning disability," he said. Frustrated with what he considered a waste of time, he started skipping classes and looking for work so he could contribute to household expenses. Soon, he dropped out altogether.

A friend told him about El Paso Academy where classes were smaller, and students received individual attention. He said teachers there were proactive about keeping him engaged and helping him be successful. Renteria enrolled, got up to speed with his peers, and graduated with a B average. Two years later, he enrolled at University of Texas at El Paso, where he studied criminal justice.

By serving students like Renteria, public charter schools are putting Texas closer to achieving the "60x30TX" goal established by the state legislature in 2015. The initiative aims to have 60% of Texans between the ages of 25 and 34 earn a post-secondary certificate or college degree by the year 2030.

These numbers become even more impressive when students like Renteria graduate from college, and positively impact the lives of other young people at risk of dropping out. "I became what I was looking for," Renteria said.

Prior to becoming an educator at his alma mater, Renteria worked as a tutor with the local school district and as a youth activities specialist at Club Rec, an after-school program that offers sports, academic support and activities. He also served as a corrections officer in the Texas Juvenile Justice Department, where it became clear to him that young people have a desire to change, but often don't know how to do it.

By serving students like Renteria, public charter schools are putting Texas closer to achieving the "60x30TX" goal established by the state legislature in 2015.

"I was able to instill that change begins with them," he said. He also realized that his mentoring skills could be used to teach high school students how to avoid the mistakes that landed them in the criminal justice system in the first place. "I want to be that individual who makes an impact and helps them get back on track."

Renteria loves working with the students at El Paso Academy because he remembers what it felt like to have a school give up on him. He doesn't want other students to feel marginalized, and works to create a space where students know they can count on their school. And when he tells his students that El Paso Academy has their back, it's not just talk. It's an experience he's lived.



Albert Renteria, El Paso Academy Social Studies teacher

Premier High Student Overcoming a Lack of Motivation on an 18-Hour Bus Ride to Abilene

Previously published by Timothy Chipp, Abilene Reporter-News | May 24, 2021

To find Bryant Scarlett's path to the high school graduation stage, one has to start looking in Jamaica.

There, Scarlett was unmotivated. Lacking direction and living with his mother who jumped from one employment opportunity to the next, school never was interesting enough to hold his attention.

He'd rather be writing, he said.

Because of a family tragedy, he, his mother and sister found themselves in the United States. On a bus ride from Florida to Texas, the world shifted.

"I was thinking about what I was going to do with my life," Scarlett, 21, said. "We've come to America and I have this opportunity and I'm going to be a bum? I've gotta buckle down. And from there, I just went off."

At an age when the motivated are going off to college, Scarlett entered that year as a freshman at Premier High School. And now, at an age where college graduation is typically in sight, he finally finishes high school with graduation at 7 p.m. Thursday at the Paramount Theatre, 352 Cypress St.

FINDING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Scarlett's time in Jamaica included a stop at Spot Valley High School, which the American system would consider a middle school.

Jamaican schooling ends at 16.

There, he said, he fell in with a certain crowd. He said he tried to fit in, but he really wasn't great at accomplishing that goal.

When he was 14, his mother's husband — who was living at the time in an apartment in Miami, Florida — died.

Because his family was so far away and unable to drop everything to travel to the U.S., his belongings were split up among his other family members. Scarlett's mother was left with an apartment now in her name with no way of paying the rent, he said.

Seeing no other way, they moved to Miami. With hardly a plan, he said. His mother started work as a janitor to help pay the bills, but they soon lost the apartment anyway.

At the same time, Scarlett still was skipping school, choosing to spend his time at home writing. Whether it was rap verses, poetry, scripts for animated television he hoped would one day become reality, Scarlett was perfecting that part of his brain.

School, he thought, was meaningless.

They moved first to West Palm Beach. Shortly thereafter, his mother's new job at Blue Cross Blue Shield brought the family west to Abilene.

He had 18 hours on that bus to get his act together.

GETTING IT TOGETHER

As graduation approaches, Scarlett said it was the nonsense approach by now-Campus Director J.P. Reeves that helped keep him in line.

Premier's credit recovery-style options allowed Scarlett to go at his own pace once he enrolled.

But Reeves, he said, pushed him to be better than the slacker who got on that Greyhound bus.

In the process, Scarlett found out he actually loved learning about some specific subjects. And while writing



Bryant Scarlett, Premier High School

is one of his favorite hobbies, it's not the only thing he excelled in.

There's also science, he said.

"I'm fascinated by life and the human body," he said. "There's so much more out there that we don't see."

Life has changed so much for Scarlett since he changed his mentality. He thinks back on the way he was, who he pretended to be, and feels an overwhelming need, he said, to make amends.

In some way, he said, he owes it to himself and those who he was trouble for.

"I really want to go back to Jamaica at some point and apologize to my teachers there," he said.

Next up for Scarlett? He's looking to get his driver's license, for one. And this coming school year, he's hoping to continue his education by enrolling at Cisco College.

"I put myself in the situation I was in," he said, "and on that bus, I thought I wanted some things but I had no plan on how to achieve them. Only I could get myself out of that situation and I did it."

Board Member is a Role Model for Students

A mentor once told Eric Calderon that educators and role models should provide young people with windows and mirrors. Windows so they can see opportunities in the world; mirrors to reflect faces like theirs.

In his role as a member of the board of directors at YES Prep, a public charter school in Houston, Calderon serves as both a window and a mirror for more than 14,000 Kindergarten through 12th grade students. After graduating from Texas A&M University with a bachelor's degree in engineering, Calderon earned his Master of Business Administration degree from Harvard University. He then returned to his native Houston and bought L-K Industries with him, a manufacturing company that makes centrifuges and glassware for the oil industry.

When Calderon invited 25 juniors and seniors from YES Prep to tour his company, he introduced many of them to an industry they never knew existed. Several of the students said they passed the white brick building every day on their way to school, and always wondered what L-K Industries was. As Calderon opened the doors to his company for the young visitors, he also showed them that a first-generation college graduate and grandson of Mexican immigrants like him could run a thriving company that contributes to the local economy. "The kids were driven by this," Calderon said.

The goal is for 100% of YES Prep seniors to be accepted to college. It's a lofty ambition considering that students from economically disadvantaged communities like theirs typically have a 1-in-10 chance of going to college. "We are unapologetically focused on college prep for

our students," Calderon explained. "When you walk down the halls, you'll see college banners, and our students start attending college signing ceremonies for the seniors as early as sixth grade. There's an expectation, a culture, and visual reminders."

Is YES Prep able to achieve its goal? Spoiler alert: the answer is in its name.

Charter school boards are not only responsible for helping their schools achieve their missions, they also face strict regulations and guidelines regarding their governance. "There's accountability to the state, and we take our management role and fiduciary duties very seriously," Calderon said. "In addition to that, our success as a board comes from a true commitment to the mission and a passion for the students we serve. We are more than a neighborhood school, we're a community school. Because when we do our job well, we send more students to college, and they return to make the Houston workforce stronger."

And when that happens, the community has a whole new generation of windows and mirrors.



Eric Calderon, Board Member, YES Prep



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