



**D.C. POLICY CENTER**

Education Policy Initiative

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# **Chronic absenteeism as a barrier to college and career readiness in D.C.**

Chronic absenteeism—defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason—remains elevated across D.C. public schools in the wake of the pandemic. In school year 2023-24, 40 percent of students were chronically absent.<sup>1</sup> While midyear data for school year 2024-25 shows a modest improvement—a three percentage-point decline as of November—the rates are still alarmingly high. Chronic absenteeism has improved from its pandemic-era peak of 48 percent in the first year of in-person school after the pandemic began, but remains 11 percentage points higher than the pre-pandemic rate of 29 percent in school year 2018-19.<sup>2</sup> The problem is particularly acute for high school students: 56 percent were chronically absent in school year 2023-24.

D.C. has committed to cutting chronic absenteeism in half to 24 percent by school year 2026-27. This is an important goal—not just for attendance itself, but because attendance is tightly linked to academic performance and long-term outcomes. The Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE)’s 2023-24 Attendance Report found a positive (albeit small) association between in-seat attendance and student growth on the statewide assessment in math and English Language Arts (ELA).<sup>3</sup>

The implications of absenteeism extend beyond test scores. National research has shown that students who miss more school are significantly less likely to graduate, enroll in college, or be prepared for postsecondary success. The University of Chicago Consortium found that students who enter the 9<sup>th</sup> grade with low 8<sup>th</sup> grade attendance or grades have slim chances of high school graduation, let alone college success if they don’t receive additional supports.<sup>4</sup> Using a decade’s worth of administrative data from a large and

diverse urban school district in California, researchers found that ten absences in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade (approximately 6 percent of the school year) reduced the probability of enrolling in college by 2 percent.<sup>5</sup> Lastly, students who are chronically absent for years between 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades are over seven times more likely to drop out of high school, which also has implications for college and career readiness.<sup>6</sup>

### **New data from OSSE reinforces the connection between attendance and college and career readiness in D.C.**

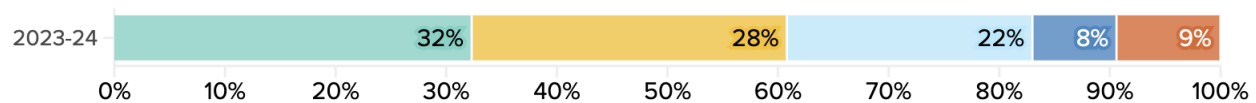
To examine how chronic absenteeism shapes college and career readiness outcomes for D.C. students, the D.C. Policy Center requested and analyzed aggregate data from OSSE across four school years—two before the pandemic (2017–18 and 2018–19) and two following the start of the pandemic (2021–22 and 2022–23). The analysis compares post-secondary college and career outcomes for students across five attendance tiers as defined by OSSE:<sup>7</sup>

- **Satisfactory attendance**  
*(missed <5% of the school year)*  
32 percent of students were in this group in school year 2023-24.
- **At-risk attendance**  
*(5–9.99% of the school year)*  
28 percent of students were in this group in school year 2023-24.
- **Moderate chronic absence**  
*(10–19.99% of the school year)*  
22 percent of the students were in this group in school year 2023-24.
- **Severe chronic absence**  
*(20–29.99% of the school year)*  
8 percent of the students were in this group in school year 2023-24.
- **Profound chronic absence**  
*(≥30% of the school year)*  
9 percent of the students were in this group in school year 2023-24.



## Chronic absenteeism tiers, school year 2023-24

**Chronic absenteeism tier** ■ Satisfactory Attendance (missed <5%) ■ At-risk Attendance (missed 5%-9.99%)  
■ Moderate Chronic Absence (missed 10% - 19.99%) ■ Severe Chronic Absence (missed 20% - 29.99%)  
■ Profound Chronic Absence (30%+)



Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2024. "2023-24 Attendance Brief." OSSE. Retrieved from [https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page\\_content/attachments/2023-24%20Attendance%20Brief.pdf](https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2023-24%20Attendance%20Brief.pdf)



The analysis uses four indicators of college and career readiness:

- (1) Enrollment in a 2- or 4-year college after high school graduation,
- (2) Performance on Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) exams,
- (3) Participation in dual enrollment courses, and
- (4) Meeting the SAT College and Career Readiness benchmark.

Correlation of these outcomes with attendance tiers across four years shows that the more school a student misses, the less likely they are to be ready for life after high school.

### Disaggregation:

The analysis is at the systems level covering high school students at all of D.C.'s public schools (including District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools). Disaggregation across student groups includes the following:

- Student race and ethnicity (Black, Latino, white, other)
- Gender (male, female)
- At-risk status
- English learners
- Disability status
- Ninth grade repetition
- Meeting or exceeding expectations on the state assessment

The findings are descriptive and should not be interpreted as causal. For interactive versions of the charts published in this report, visit [dcpolicycenter.org](https://dcpolicycenter.org).

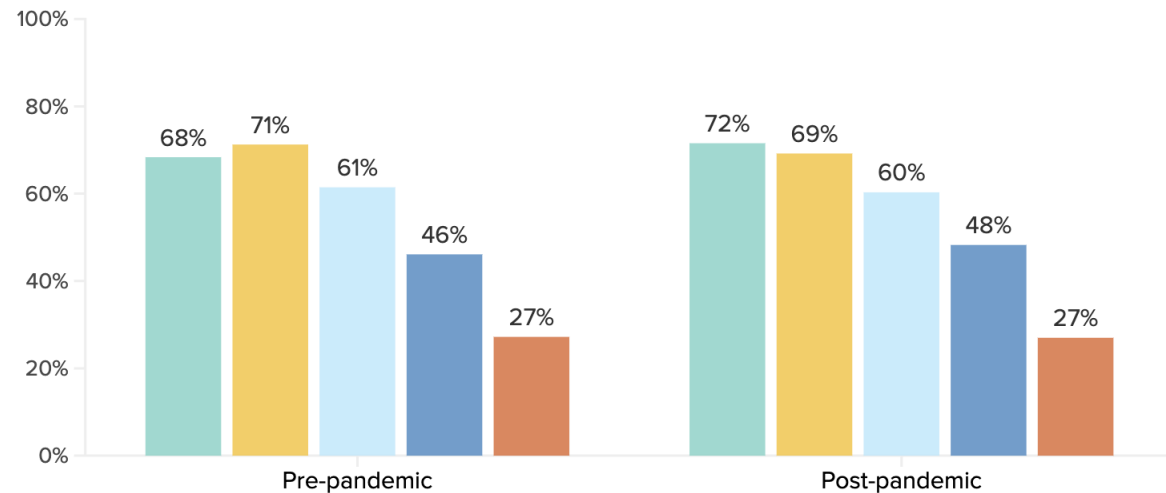
### Systems level change:

It is important to note that the definition of absenteeism changed during the pandemic and now students must miss a longer share of the day (40 percent or more compared to 20 percent pre-pandemic) to be counted absent. In theory, this change would shift students towards lower levels of chronic absenteeism, but we do not have data on whether this shift along absenteeism tiers is material.

# Postsecondary enrollment and chronic absenteeism tier for all D.C.'s high school graduates

**Chronic absenteeism tier** ■ Satisfactory Attendance (missed <5%) ■ At-risk Attendance (missed 5%-9.99%) ■ Moderate Chronic Absence (missed 10%-19.99%) ■ Severe Chronic Absence (missed 20%-29.99%) ■ Profound Chronic Absence (30%+)

Enrollment in postsecondary within 6 months of graduation



Source: Data requested from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).  
Note: Pre-pandemic averages school years 2017-18 and 2018-19, post-pandemic averages school years 2021-22 and 2022-23.



## KEY FINDINGS

### Postsecondary enrollment: A clear link to attendance

The six-month postsecondary enrollment rate tracks the share of high school graduates who enroll in a two- or four-year college within six months of graduation.<sup>8</sup>

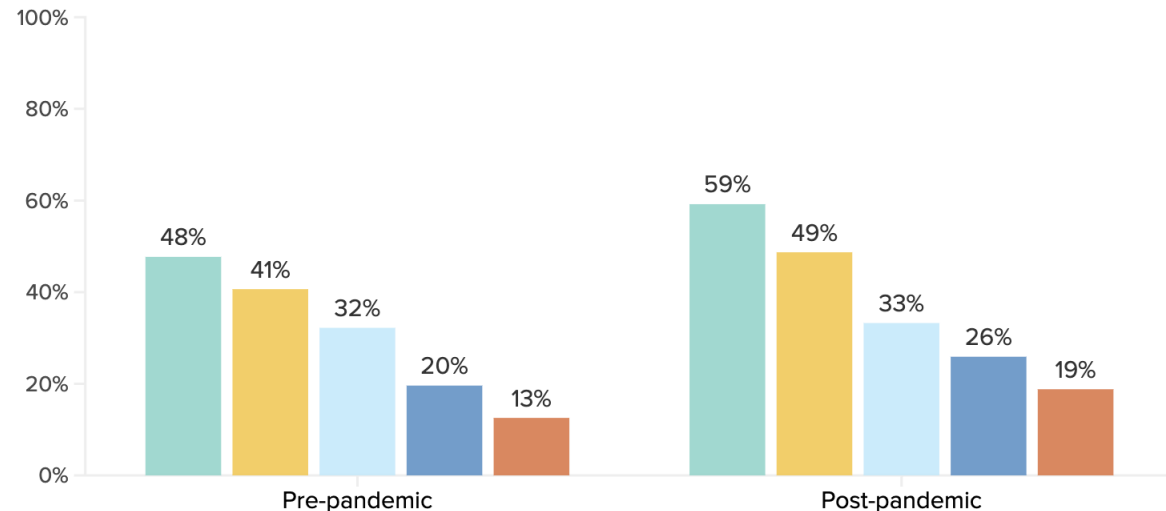
Enrollment in postsecondary has rebounded from a decline during the pandemic, but the link between attendance and post-pandemic outcomes has remained strong. Post-pandemic, on average, 7 in 10 high school graduates with satisfactory attendance (missed <5% of the year) enrolled in college, compared to just 3 in 10 among those with profound chronic absenteeism (missed 30% or more). This gap of 41 percentage points has persisted from pre-pandemic years and holds across

student groups. For example, among “at-risk” students<sup>9</sup>, postsecondary enrollment is 54 percent for those with satisfactory attendance versus just 23 percent for those with profound chronic absenteeism.

## Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) performance and chronic absenteeism tier

**Chronic absenteeism tier** ■ Satisfactory Attendance (missed <5%) ■ At-risk Attendance (missed 5%-9.99%) ■ Moderate Chronic Absence (missed 10%-19.99%) ■ Severe Chronic Absence (missed 20%-29.99%) ■ Profound Chronic Absence (30%+)

**Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) performance**



Source: Data requested from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).  
Note: Pre-pandemic averages school years 2017-18 and 2018-19, post-pandemic averages school years 2021-22 and 2022-23.



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## AP/IB performance: Higher attendance, higher scores

Students who take<sup>10</sup> and pass<sup>11</sup> AP and IB exams demonstrate college readiness.<sup>12</sup> This metric is calculated by the number of students in grades 9 through 12 who passed at least one AP/IB exam during the accountability year divided by the number of students in grades 9 through 12 who took at least one AP/IB exam during the accountability year.

Post-pandemic, 59 percent of students with satisfactory attendance passed the AP/IB exams compared to 19 percent of students with profound chronic absence—a threefold difference. This is consistent with pre-pandemic trends, when 48 percent of students with satisfactory attendance met or exceeded AP and IB benchmarks compared to 13 percent of students with profound chronic absence. For context, a

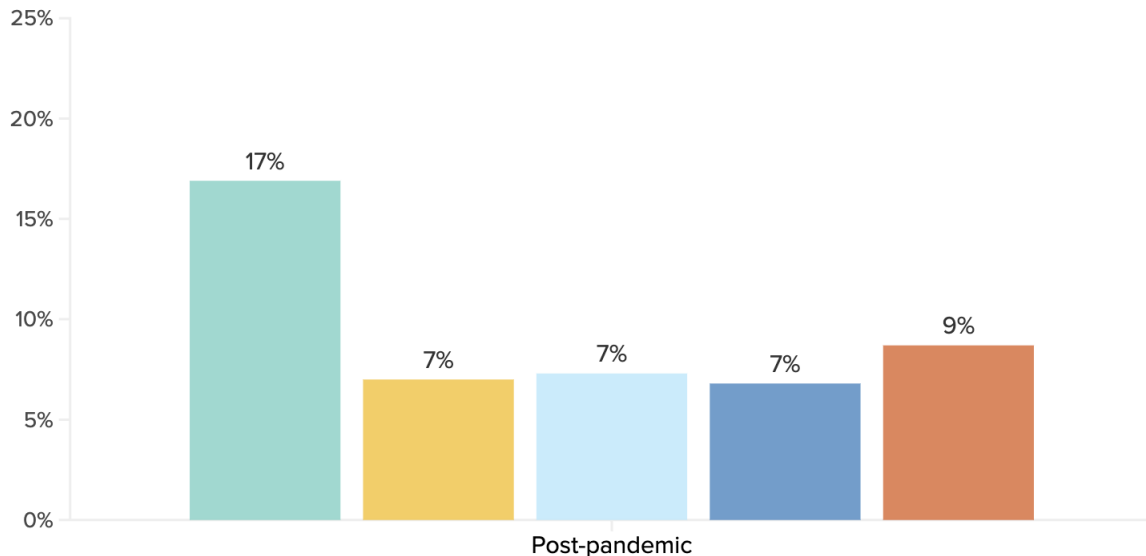
similar share of students participated in AP and IB exams post-pandemic in school year 2021-22 (data were not available for school year 2022-23 as this year also includes dual enrollment in the same metric).<sup>13</sup>

Among students with satisfactory attendance post-pandemic, performance on AP/IB exams varied widely by subgroup: 40 percent of Black students, 53 percent of Latino students, 35 percent of English learners, and 40 percent of at-risk students met or exceeded the benchmark, compared to 87 percent of white students and 79 percent of students of other races. Post-pandemic, students with disabilities were the only subgroup with satisfactory attendance who saw a decline—a 10 percentage point drop—in the likelihood of meeting or exceeding AP/IB benchmarks.

## Dual enrollment participation and chronic absenteeism tier

**Chronic absenteeism tier** ■ Satisfactory Attendance (missed <5%) ■ At-risk Attendance (missed 5%-9.99%)  
■ Moderate Chronic Absence (missed 10%-19.99%) ■ Severe Chronic Absence (missed 20%-29.99%)  
■ Profound Chronic Absence (30%+)

### Dual enrollment participation



Source: Data requested from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).  
Note: Pre-pandemic averages school years 2017-18 and 2018-19, post-pandemic averages school years 2021-22 and 2022-23.



## Dual Enrollment: Participation Drops as Absenteeism Rises.

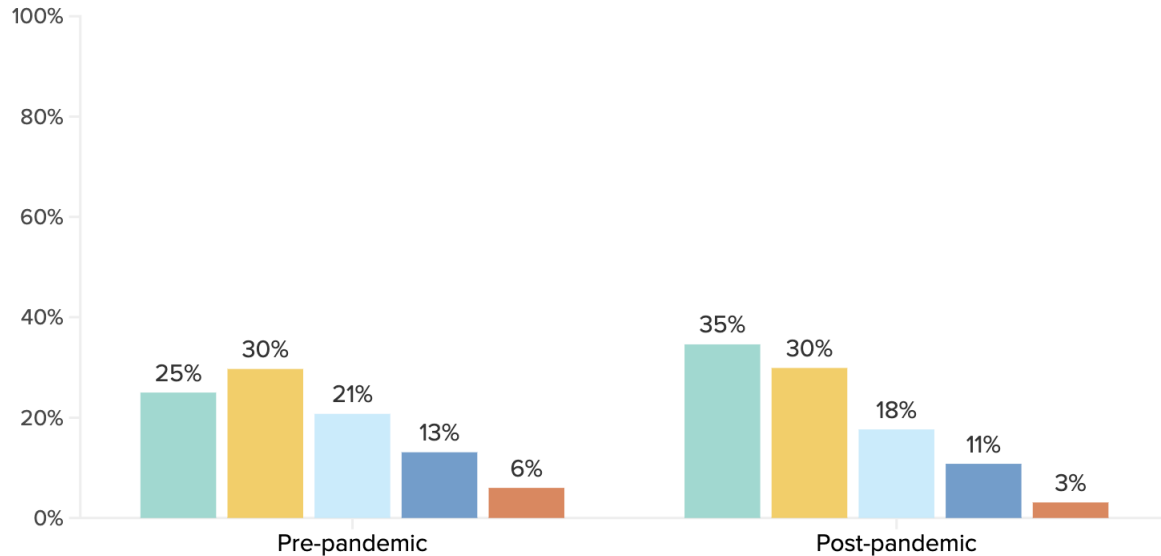
Dual enrollment provides early exposure to college-level coursework.<sup>14</sup> For dual enrollment, participation data were only available for post-pandemic school years. 17 percent of students with satisfactory attendance participated in dual enrollment compared to 7 to 9 percent of students within the other three chronic absenteeism tiers. English learners, Latino students, and students of other races with satisfactory attendance enrolled in dual enrollment at rates higher than other student groups. Data are not available pre-pandemic, but in the spring of 2023, participation in dual

enrollment through OSSE programs was proportional to demographics of high school students: 72 percent of participants were Black, 18 percent were Latino, 8 percent were white, and 2 percent identified as other races and ethnicities.<sup>15</sup>

## SAT College Ready performance and chronic absenteeism tier

**Chronic absenteeism tier** ■ Satisfactory Attendance (missed <5%) ■ At-risk Attendance (missed 5%-9.99%) ■ Moderate Chronic Absence (missed 10%-19.99%) ■ Severe Chronic Absence (missed 20%-29.99%) ■ Profound Chronic Absence (30%+)

**SAT College Ready performance**



Source: Data requested from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).  
Note: Pre-pandemic averages school years 2017-18 and 2018-19, post-pandemic averages school years 2021-22 and 2022-23.



## SAT College and Career Readiness benchmarks show a wide and persistent gap across absenteeism tiers.

OSSE tracks SAT performance based on College Board's College and Career Readiness Benchmarks (a score of at least 530 on the Math section and 480 on the Evidence-Based Reading and Writing section). This is one metric where attendance became significantly more important for success post-pandemic: there was a 10-percentage point increase in college readiness for those with satisfactory attendance (from 25 percent to 35 percent).

Post-pandemic, just 3 percent of those with profound chronic absenteeism were college ready—a gap of 32 percentage points between them and students with

satisfactory attendance. Students with disabilities had the lowest SAT College Ready benchmark performance across all absenteeism tiers, and white students had the highest across all tiers. Attendance appears to have a greater association with college readiness for Black and Latino compared to white students and students of other races. While all subgroups saw improvements for those with satisfactory attendance, the gap between Black and Latino students and white students and students of other races is at least 50 percentage points.





## CONCLUSION

### **Chronic absenteeism is connected to being prepared for what's next.**

These patterns reinforce what prior research and OSSE's own findings already show: students who attend school regularly are more likely to be better positioned to succeed—not only in the classroom, but also in college and beyond. Attendance levels are associated with achievement growth in grades 4 through 8, and this new analysis shows that the same holds true for postsecondary outcomes.

To meet the District's goal of cutting chronic absenteeism in half by 2026–27, policy must go beyond surface-level incentives. This means investing in the systems that support student engagement, identifying

early warning signs, and aligning high school and postsecondary systems to ensure students stay on track. Chronic absenteeism is not just a reflection of student behavior—it is a signal that a student is not being adequately supported. Reducing could open the door for improving college and career readiness across the city.

### **Acknowledgments**

*The authors thank the Division of Data, Assessment and Research at D.C.'s Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), who prepared this data upon request and provided valuable comments on earlier drafts. All remaining errors belong to the authors.*



# Endnotes

**1** Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2024. DC School Report Card. OSSE. Retrieved from <https://schoolreportcard.dc.gov/home>

**2** D.C. implemented a new attendance policy in school year 2022-23, making year to year comparisons tricky before and after this year. The new attendance policy states that students must attend at least 60 percent of the day, meaning they can miss up to 40 percent of the day without being counted as absent (compared to 20 percent under the old policy).

**3** Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2024. “2023-24 Attendance Annual Report.” Retrieved from: <https://osse.dc.gov/node/1720676>

**4** Allensworth, E.M., Gwynne, J.A., Moore, P., & de la Torre, M. 2014. Looking Forward to High School and College: Middle Grade Indicators of Readiness in Chicago Public Schools. University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED553150.pdf>

**5** Lee, M., Liu, J., & Gershenson, S. 2021. The short – and long-run impacts of secondary school absences. Journal of Public Economics. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272721000773?via%3Dihub>

**6** National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO). 2018. “NCEO Brief”. NCEO. Retrieved from <https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/OnlinePubs/briefs/brief15/brief15.html>

**7** Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2024. “2023-24

Attendance Brief.” Retrieved from [https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page\\_content/attachments/2023-24%20Attendance%20Brief.pdf](https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2023-24%20Attendance%20Brief.pdf)

**8** Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2024. 2024 DC School Report Card Technical Guide. OSSE. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2024%20Report%20Card%20Technical%20Guide%20%28Final%29.pdf>

**9** Students are designated at-risk if they meet one or more of the following criteria: experiencing homelessness, being in the District’s foster care system, qualifying for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or being overage in high school.

**10** Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2024. 2024 DC School Report Card Technical Guide. OSSE. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2024%20Report%20Card%20Technical%20Guide%20%28Final%29.pdf>

**11** Students are considered to have passed an AP exam with a score of 3 or higher and an IB exam with a score of 4 or higher.

**12** Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2024. 2024 DC School Report Card Technical Guide. OSSE. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2024%20Report%20Card%20Technical%20Guide%20%28Final%29.pdf>

This performance reflects the number of students in 9th-12th grade who passed

at least one AP or IB exam during the accountability year divided by the number of students who took at least one AP/IB exam in the 9th-12th grade year.

**13** Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2025. DC School Report Card Resource Library. OSSE. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/page/dc-school-report-card-resource-library>

AP/IB participation is calculated by the number of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled at a school during the accountability year and the previous year who took an AP/IB test during their high school career divided by the number of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled at a school in both the accountability year and the previous year.

**14** Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). “Dual Enrollment Opportunities.” OSSE. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/page/osse-dual-enrollment-opportunities>

**15** Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME). 2023. Strengthening Student Access and Success in Dual Enrollment. DME. Retrieved from <https://dme.dc.gov/publication/strengthening-student-access-and-success-dual-enrollment>

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