



Fall 2026 · A Thought Partner Publication



FCSN Connections

Engage • Educate • Empower

• Together We Thrive

Your seat at the 2026 Gala: Saturday, October 17 at the Newton Marriott. Denim, diamonds, and a room full of families.

• Engage. Educate. Empower.

FCSN's fall giving campaign takes our three words one month at a time. Here is what each one means, and how to give.

• Mi Hermoso Milagro

Celebrating Ruth de la Cruz's new book, and the partnership that keeps Spanish-speaking families connected.



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"Every family has a story. For five decades, families across Massachusetts have found information, connection and hope through FCSN."

Executive Director's Brief

Back to School: Meeting This Moment for Students and Families

By Trish Nellius, Executive Director

As backpacks are packed and classrooms fill again, families of children with disabilities begin the school year with hope—and important questions: Will my child be understood? Will the right support be in place? Will our school recognize my child's strengths?

This school year begins at an important moment for special education across the Commonwealth. Nearly 193,000 Massachusetts public school students ages 3–21—about one in five students—have IEPs.

Massachusetts is experiencing the highest special education enrollment in its history, driven by rising identification, more complex needs, and declining general enrollment. That growth reflects the scale of our shared responsibility and the need for schools, families, and communities to work together so every student can participate, learn, and belong.



Trish Nellius

Executive Director, FCSN

IDEA continues to guarantee eligible children a free appropriate public education and the services they need. In June 2026, the U.S. Department of Education's annual state determinations again emphasized that compliance must translate into meaningful student outcomes.

As federal responsibilities evolve under the new structure, families will need clear communication about what is changing, what is not, and how any changes may affect their children. Whatever administrative structure is in place, students' rights under IDEA, the need for timely services, and the importance of coordinated support across education, health, and workforce systems must remain at the center. FCSN is committed to monitoring these changes to help ensure children and families receive the rights and services guaranteed under the law.

Families and educators still face uneven implementation, staffing shortages, service delays, and gaps between the promise and practice of inclusion. Federal guidance highlights inclusive practices, staff retention, thoughtful behavioral support, and coordinated transition planning—priorities that depend on skilled teams, high expectations, accessible instruction, and strong family partnerships.

Families are essential members of the educational team—not visitors to it. Their knowledge of their children matters, and educators need preparation, resources, and partnership to carry out individualized plans effectively. Consistent, student-centered communication helps teams solve problems sooner, celebrate progress, and build lasting trust.

FCSN is committed to helping families understand their rights, prepare for meetings, find resources, and advocate effectively. We champion a system where inclusion is meaningful, services are timely, transitions are planned, and every child's strength and potential are central to their educational experience.

As the school year begins, let us hold to a simple standard: every student deserves high expectations, genuine belonging, and the support to make progress. To our students, families, educators, and partners—welcome back. Together, we are ready to learn, advocate, and move forward.

In partnership,
Patricia Nellius

Fall Giving Campaign • August to October 2026

Engage. Educate. Empower. Three words, three months, one campaign.

By the FCSN Development & Communications Team



Engagement is belonging. The campaign's first month centers the families FCSN serves.

Engage. Educate. Empower. For FCSN, these three words are more than a tagline. This fall, they are the heart of a giving campaign that tells one clear story each month about what your support makes possible.

Rather than one appeal that tries to say everything at once, the campaign moves month by month, community by community. Engage, focused on families who find connection. Educate, highlighting individuals and professionals strengthened through the trainings and workshops. Empower, centering on youth, young adults, and families building confidence.

Each month answers the question every donor asks: What does my gift actually do?

Your gift turns isolation into connection. It helps families find trusted information, understand their rights, and become strong partners in their child's education.

It supports workshops, helpline conversations, parent-to-parent matches, leadership opportunities, and transition guidance that help families and youth move from uncertainty toward possibility.

The campaign runs through the end of October, with every gift supporting the same mission: ensuring families across Massachusetts have the information, training, advocacy, and connections they need to help children and youth with disabilities thrive.

Visit fcsn.org/donate to make a one-time gift or become part of FCSN's monthly giving program. Other giving options are also available. Questions can be directed to info@fcsn.org or [617-236-7210](tel:617-236-7210).

THE ASK

Give today and help turn isolation into connection, and connection into opportunity.
fcsn.org/donate

Staff Spotlight • Partnerships

Mi Hermoso Milagro: celebrating Ruth de la Cruz, and a partnership that reaches Spanish-speaking families

By Loryn Cohen, Director of Development & Communications

This August, several of us from FCSN attended the launch celebration for *Mi Hermoso Milagro: Trisomía 18 Compatible con la Vida*, the new book by our colleague Ruth Esther de la Cruz. It was a joyful afternoon, and a chance to celebrate a milestone with someone who spends most of her days celebrating other people's.

Ruth is FCSN's Outreach Coordinator for Latino families in the Parent Training and Information Center. She came to the United States from Santo Domingo, and, like so many of the parents she now supports, she learned the special education system the hard way, as a mother. Written in Spanish, her book tells that story: a diagnosis for her daughter that doctors described as not compatible with life, and everything that came after. It is not a story of certainty. It is a story of fear, faith, and a family that kept going, and it is written for the families who are sitting in those same waiting rooms today.

Also celebrating with us was Raquel Quezada, founder of Fundación Cambiando el Mundo de Personas con Discapacidad (CEMDPCD) in Lawrence. FCSN has partnered with Raquel and her organization for years, often co-presenting at her trainings for Spanish-speaking parents across the Northeast region of Massachusetts. Her programs walk parents through the IEP process, build leadership skills, and offer a special education diploma course for parents, educators, and community leaders. I have been fortunate to attend a graduation of one of her cohorts, and the pride in that room is hard to describe.

Ruth's book and Raquel's foundation come from the same place: the conviction that no family should walk this road alone, and that information has to arrive in the language a family speaks. That is the work FCSN's multilingual team does every day, and it is a big part of why our partnership with CEMDPCD matters. Congratulations, Ruth. We are so proud of you.



Ruth signs copies of *Mi Hermoso Milagro* at the launch celebration.



FCSN colleagues with Ruth (center) at the launch.

FIND THE BOOK, FIND SUPPORT

Mi Hermoso Milagro: Trisomía 18 Compatible con la Vida (Spanish, paperback) is available on Amazon.

FCSN offers information and support in Spanish. Call 800.331.0688 or visit fcsn.org/contact-us for our language lines.

Did You Know?

Updates to Massachusetts Special Education

By Cambria Russell, Chief of Programs

Massachusetts updated its special education regulations under 603 CMR 28.00 (the rules that govern how public schools provide special education). These updates reflect the passage of the Protect Education Equity Act. They strengthen requirements related to English learners and clarify discipline procedures for students with disabilities.

Here is what families need to know about these changes.



Better Support for English Learners

The new rules protect students who speak a primary language other than English.

- Districts must give assessments and evaluation materials in the student's primary language. This helps ensure evaluations provide accurate information about what the student knows and can do academically, developmentally, and functionally.
- The IEP team must consider the student's English language proficiency during the Individualized Education Program (IEP) development process.
- School districts must provide special education training to English as a Second Language (ESL) educators.

Stronger Protections During Discipline

The state added a new section, 603 CMR 28.11, on discipline procedures for students who receive special education services.

- Schools must provide services during any disciplinary removal, regardless of length.
- Districts must provide written notice for all disciplinary actions.
- A change in placement occurs when removals total more than 10 days, cumulative or consecutive.



These regulations are now in effect across Massachusetts public schools, charter schools, and collaboratives.

Save Your Seat • The 2026 FCSN Gala

Together We Thrive: one night, every family, every story

By the FCSN Development & Communications Team

Saturday, October 17, 2026, 6:00 to 11:00 PM, at the Newton Marriott. A Night of Impact, Denim & Diamonds.

For more than 50 years, FCSN has stood beside families of children with disabilities—offering the information, training, and advocacy they need to navigate challenges, celebrate progress, and help every child thrive.

Much of this work happens quietly, in everyday moments that make a lasting difference: a call to our helpline, a Tuesday evening workshop, a parent leader helping a neighbor understand an IEP letter. But one night each year, that quiet, steady impact comes together in one room. That night is the Gala.



Paddle up. The live auction is one of the most talked-about moments of the night.

Last year, the ballroom was filled with the people who power this mission: families, advocates, educators, partners, and sponsors sharing tables, stories, and a commitment to a more inclusive future. This year's theme, Together We Thrive, captures both the spirit of the evening and the heart of FCSN's work: progress made possible when families, communities, and partners come together.

Denim and diamonds set the tone, so come as you are, add a little sparkle, and get ready for a night of dinner, dancing, connection, and celebration. The evening will also feature a silent and a lively auction—because every bid, every seat, and every sponsorship helps sustain a full year of information, training, and advocacy for families across Massachusetts.

AT A GLANCE

Saturday, October 17, 2026 6:00 PM to 11:00 PM
Newton Marriott, Newton, MA Dress: denim and diamonds

fcsn.org/gala2026



LEND Program Updates

What We Learned by Working Together

By Meghan Chapman, Transition Services

FCSN is proud to have multiple LEND graduates on staff. What's LEND? The Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Other Related Disabilities (LEND) program is all about bringing people together—different professionals, people with disabilities, and families—to learn from each other and make things better.

With Federal funding in question, a group of LEND alumni, faculty, and graduates brought that same spirit of teamwork to co-designing, writing, and publishing an article promoting LEND's legacy, importance, and impact, published in Utah State University's Disability and Diversity: Navigating and Networking Journal.

The article brought together people from healthcare, education, advocacy, research, disability services, and lived experience with disability. Each of us brought different experiences, knowledge, and connections to LEND. Just like our weekly LEND sessions, pulling all those perspectives into something that was meaningful and communicated what we thought was important, it took time. We had conversations, asked questions, made changes, and sometimes went back to the drawing board. Most importantly, we listened to one another and trusted that each person had something valuable to contribute.

This process reminded me of what we advocate for here at FCSN: families being treated as equals at the IEP table and in the doctor's office. Certainly, educators and doctors have expertise that deserves respect. So, too, do families. Keep having those conversations, asking questions, making changes, and - when needed - go back to the drawing board. Just as LEND trains professionals to be more confident that they can address the needs of people with disabilities, FCSN has free trainings and 1:1 information and support to help families feel more confident to be advocates and leaders.

For support from FCSN, visit www.fcsn.org/contact-us



School Resources

Making Room for High School Inclusion

By Cambria Russell, Chief of Programs

Families often focus on transition goals, services, and supports when preparing for life after high school. Yet one practical factor can significantly affect whether those goals become reality: a student's schedule. A recent report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) highlights how decisions about class schedules and service delivery can influence students' access to electives, career and technical education opportunities, extracurricular activities, and peer connections that support successful adult outcomes.

The GAO report notes that secondary students with disabilities report higher levels of satisfaction with their ability to learn in general education classrooms compared to elementary students. However, gaining and sustaining access to those classrooms alongside non-disabled peers often requires planning around staffing, scheduling, services, and school resources.

The report highlights one district where a principal restructured the entire master schedule to prioritize access to electives and vocational training:

"The principal shifted class schedules so that students with disabilities could attend classes better aligned with their IEP goals. The school developed an overall schedule around students' interests and availability, making sure classes like career and technical education and physical education were in periods where students with disabilities could participate with their peers without disabilities."

Career and technical education (CTE) courses build practical workplace skills and help students explore career interests before leaving high school. When schedules are not designed to preserve access to CTE opportunities, students may miss valuable chances to build workplace skills, explore career interests, and strengthen relationships with peers.





The report also underscores how shared activities shape a student's sense of self and community during the high school years. One student reflected on their experience in an elective setting:

"In Art class and in Art Club, I had a chance to teach my classmates how to draw cartoon animals."

Another student pointed out the barrier when support is missing:

"[I] did not have any friends from [g]en [e]d classes, and [I] found it difficult to join the clubs without support."

As Massachusetts districts continue implementing student-led transition planning starting at age 14, aligning high school master schedules with student interests and vocational goals is a practical step toward building real independence.

What You Can Do

Self-Advocates, look at your high school schedule before the school year starts. If a class or club you want to take conflicts with a support service, ask your IEP team to explore alternate scheduling options so you do not miss out on career tech or electives.

Families, during your student's annual transition planning meeting, ask direct questions about the master schedule. Request that pull-out services be scheduled around core electives, vocational classes, and extracurricular activities rather than replacing them.

SAVE THE DATE & CALL FOR WORKSHOPS

Visions of Community 2027

Saturday, March 13, 2027

**Learn, connect, and imagine what's possible.
Together.**



PROPOSALS DUE

Friday, October 30, 2026

fcsn.org/voc



School Finder Spotlight

Career Technical Education: What Middle School Families Need to Know

By Aceriane Leal, Team Lead, Community Services Programs



Career technical education (CTE) gives students the opportunity to combine academics with hands-on learning while exploring possible careers. This educational option can help prepare students for employment, apprenticeships, and postsecondary education. CTE programs are part of the public education system and are offered at no cost to enrolled students. Students of all backgrounds and abilities are encouraged to explore this option.

Families do not have to wait until high school to explore this option. Middle school is an important time to explore which CTE schools and programs are available, talk with students about their interests, attend information sessions or tours, and understand how to apply. CTE options and admissions requirements often differ by school and community. Applications must be available by November 1, and each school sets its application deadline between January 1 and March 1. When a school or program receives more applications than it has available seats, students are admitted through a lottery.

Families can use the Massachusetts School Finder tool to begin exploring CTE schools and programs that connect with their student's interests. They can also contact the School Finder Help Line for support exploring educational options, understanding the admissions process, and considering programs that connect with their student's interests, strengths, and future goals. Information, resources, and individualized assistance are available in multiple languages, helping more families access the information they need.

School counselors, educators, and community organizations can use the CTE Outreach Toolkit to help more families explore CTE opportunities. The toolkit includes overviews, videos, flyers, social media materials, and translation resources available in English, Haitian Creole, Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

Exploring options today can open doors for tomorrow.

Back to School Resource

Does Your Child Need a Health Care Plan?

By Alisha Durant, Training & Partnerships Coordinator, DPH Programs



As families prepare for a new school year, there is often a lot of focus on IEPs, 504 Plans, schedules, and services. For children with health care needs, there is another important piece of back to school planning: making sure the school has a clear plan for meeting your child's health and safety needs during the school day.

An Individualized Health Care Plan (IHCP) is created with the school nurse and explains how your child's health needs will be supported at school. Depending on your child's needs, this might include medications, treatments, symptoms staff should watch for, accommodations, communication between the school, family, and health care providers, or what staff should do if your child becomes ill. An IHCP does not replace an IEP or 504 Plan. Instead, it can work alongside these plans to address a child's health needs at school. Some students may also need an Emergency Health Care Plan that gives school staff clear instructions about what to do during a medical emergency. Work with the school nurse to identify which staff need information or training to safely support your child.

Families are an important part of this planning. Partner with your child's school nurse and health care providers to create or update the plan. Make sure the school has current medical orders, information release forms, medication information, and other needed health information. If your child's health needs change, let the school nurse know so the plan can be updated.

For children with complex health care needs, programs such as MASSTART or a local nurse liaison can provide consultation with the school team, help with IHCP and emergency planning, and provide training on your child's health care needs.

Health care planning is an important part of preparing your child to access school safely and successfully, but you don't have to figure it all out on your own. Start with your child's school nurse, involve their health care providers, and reach out for help when you need it.



Helpful Resources:

[Boston Medical Center: Individualized Health Care Plan](#)
[Massachusetts DPH: Preparing for Return to School](#)

Need help figuring out where to start?

[Contact FCSN for information and support.](#)



Pediatric Palliative Care vs. Hospice: What's the Difference

By Ana Burke, Coordinator, Pediatric Palliative Care Family Engagement & Leadership

When a child is living with a serious or life-limiting illness, families are often faced with complex medical decisions and uncertainty about the types of support available to them. Two services that are frequently misunderstood are pediatric palliative care and hospice care. While both focus on improving quality of life and supporting children and families, they serve different roles and can be accessed at different points in a child's healthcare journey.

Pediatric palliative care is an added layer of support that can begin at any stage of a serious illness, even at the time of diagnosis. It focuses on relieving pain and symptoms, improving quality of life, helping with communication and decision-making, and supporting the entire family alongside medical treatments intended to cure, control, or prolong life.

Hospice care is specialized care for children who meet hospice eligibility criteria and are nearing the end of life. It emphasizes comfort, dignity, end-of-life care planning, and bereavement support for families. In Massachusetts, pediatric hospice care can also be provided alongside disease-directed treatments, helping families maximize comfort while continuing important medical care.

Because misconceptions often prevent families and providers from accessing these valuable services early, understanding the differences is essential. This [Pediatric Palliative Care vs. Hospice Care fact sheet](#) clearly explains eligibility, goals of care, timing, and the wide range of interdisciplinary supports available to children and families.

Whether you are a parent, caregiver, healthcare provider, educator, or advocate, this resource can help you make informed decisions and connect families with the support they need.



Partner Spotlight

Coordinating Respite Care, Peer Support, and Special Needs Trusts

By FCSN and PLAN MA RI

For families caring for a loved one with complex medical, developmental, or cognitive needs, respite care is essential to sustaining long-term caregiving. It gives a primary caregiver time to rest, travel, work, or attend to other responsibilities while ensuring that their loved one continues to receive safe, appropriate support.

Why Planning Matters

Paul, whose name has been changed to protect confidentiality, is an elderly beneficiary with dementia who needs continual supervision. During the year, he attends an Adult Day Health Program five days a week, with MassHealth covering transportation and attendance. When his caregiver takes a two-week vacation, Paul stays at a local nursing home under MassHealth respite care.

The challenge is that MassHealth may cover the nursing home respite stay, but not the Adult Day Health Program at the same time, because that would be considered duplication of care and supervision services. For Paul, losing the day program would mean losing a familiar routine, social connection, and meaningful structure during an already disruptive period.

Paul's PLAN of MA & RI social worker recognized how important the program was to his well-being. She used funds from Paul's Special Needs Trust to pay for his continued attendance while he resided at the nursing home. This allowed Paul to maintain consistency while his caregiver received needed time away.

A Special Needs Trust can be valuable in this type of situation because it can supplement, rather than replace, public benefits. When properly administered, trust funds may pay for supports that improve quality of life but are not fully covered by benefit programs.

Caregiver to Caregiver Respite Care at FCSN

For families and caregivers, the Caregiver to Caregiver Respite Network at the Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN) offers another layer of support. The program connects caregivers with one another based on factors such as a child's medical and support needs, geography, language, and cultural preferences. Caregivers may give and receive respite, with staff providing support, training opportunities, and check-ins.

Working together, the Caregiver to Caregiver program and a Special Needs Trust can help families build a more reliable respite plan. The program can identify trusted, community-based respite connections, while a trust can help cover supplemental needs such as transportation, activities, adaptive supplies, communication supports, or continuity of a preferred program when public benefits do not cover everything.

Together, these resources support both sides of caregiving: the caregiver's need for rest and the loved one's need for safety, familiarity, and dignity. Paul's story shows that respite works best when it is part of a coordinated plan. With peer-based respite support, professional guidance, and thoughtful use of Special Needs Trust funds, families can reduce caregiver strain while preserving routines that help loved ones thrive.

To learn more about special needs trusts, simply sign up for a [30-minute free consultation](#). To learn more about the Caregiver to Caregiver network, [contact FCSN](#).

PLAN Special Needs Trusts

Preserve Assets | Protect Benefits | Live Well

Is Your Loved One's Future Protected?

Planned Lifetime Assistance Network (PLAN) of Massachusetts and Rhode Island helps ensure you are securing your loved one's future while protecting the benefits they rely on.

If you checked ONE or more boxes...

A Special Needs Trust may be the right next step.

Do You Need a Special Needs Trust?

- ☐ I worry about who will care for my loved one in the future.
- ☐ I want to protect their eligibility for government benefits.
- ☐ I'd like to leave money or assets without putting benefits at risk.
- ☐ I want funds available for expenses benefits don't cover.
- ☐ I want a plan that gives my family peace of mind.



A Special Needs Trust:

- Protects eligibility for means-tested government benefits.
- Preserves assets for your loved one's future
- Helps pay for needs beyond what benefits cover
- Must be irrevocable and used solely for the beneficiary

Why Families Choose PLAN?



Compassionate Support

Access to dedicated social workers who serve as the primary liaison for you and your loved one.



Complete Administration

Trust administration and payments for the beneficiary, professional fund management, annual accounting, and tax preparation.



No Minimum Assets

No minimum assets required to establish a PLAN Special Needs Pooled Trust.



Contact PLAN today!

Schedule a FREE 30-minute consultation with a specialist.



MA: (617) 244-5552
RI: (401) 234-8444



www.planofma-ri.org

In partnership with



Visit fcsn.org to learn more about the programs and services they provide.

Youth Advisory Board

Five Takeaways from a Youth Focus Group on IEPs

By Cambria Russell, Chief of Programs



FCSN invited four young people to participate in a small, youth-centered focus group on individualized education programs (IEPs). IEPs are legally binding contracts families make with schools to ensure that students receive the services they need to learn and thrive in the least restrictive environment within their schools. During the focus group, facilitators asked students questions about their participation in the IEP process, their understanding of their IEPs, and their perceptions of the support their IEPs provided. The results of the study, which were collected in person and through written notes, resulted in five notable takeaways.

- 1 Students had highly variable experiences with IEPs.** Students reported widely different levels of comfort and support from their schools during the IEP process in particular. While none of the students were completely satisfied, a few said they felt reasonably supported during the IEP process, especially as they attended multiple meetings and gained comfort and familiarity with their teams. However, at least one student struggled to get the services they needed, only getting the right IEP once they transferred to another setting. They said, “It seemed like they [the school] were doing everything they could do avoid giving me an IEP, then when they did, they wouldn’t give me the accommodations I asked for.” Another student said, “My mom says it’s like we have a marriage between the school and the student’s family. Like, you might not always like each other, but you have to stick together because you both have the same goal.” **These results suggest that overall, schools could improve their IEP processes to ensure students feel more seen and heard.**
- 2 Students often did not start participating in their IEP meetings until high school.** Although at least one student reported reading their IEP for the first time at age 7, most said that they did not understand their IEP or participate in IEP meetings until they were much older. About half of the focus group participants said they began to understand their IEPs and participate in IEP meetings in seventh grade, while the other half began in high school.

At least for these participants, the IEP teams missed out on important input from younger students about what was working and what wasn't in their IEP, and what they thought about their goals. **These results suggest that schools could do a better job of educating students about the IEPs earlier in their educational careers and could involve students in IEP meetings sooner.**

3 Students have a clear understanding of their IEP goals. Every participant in the study knew their goals and was able to articulate them and evaluate whether they were working or not. At least for these participants, this aspect of the IEP process appears to be strong. **These results suggest that students are clear about the goals section of the IEP.**

4 Students would benefit from accommodations in their IEP meetings. The student who appeared to be the most comfortable in their IEP meetings participated in these meetings in multiple ways. For example, as early as elementary school, this student remembers their parent helping them make a video thanking their teachers for their help with their IEP. This practice evolved into making videos about their thoughts about their IEP ahead of time, which they then played during their meetings. This allowed the student to think through their thoughts and express them in a more relaxed setting than a meeting. Later in their educational career, they created “a cheat sheet” they could use to advocate for themselves when they “got nervous” during IEP meetings, in addition to or instead of videos. At this point in their education, the student says that they are comfortable in IEP meetings, even “cracking jokes” with the team. This scaffolded, diverse approach to meetings could be a model for all students. **These results suggest that providing scaffolding and multiple methods of communication during IEP meetings could help students be more confident, active, articulate participants in their IEP process.**

5 Students often felt uncomfortable asking for what they needed. When asked about the level of support they receive from their school regarding their IEP, at least one student said, “I sometimes don't feel supported when they don't support my interactions with other classmates who ignore me. I wish my IEP would give me classmates who would be supportive and maybe be friends with me.” Another student reported that their situation improved when they entered a setting where all of the students around them were also on IEPs and therefore understood their situation. This same student noted, “Sometimes my teachers don't necessarily follow my IEP goals, and I know that's true for some of my friends too, but I think a lot of students are afraid to talk about that.” The fact that the student and their peers feel nervous about holding schools accountable to existing goals indicates that it may be difficult for students to ask for additional goals, especially social ones. **These results suggest that students may feel more supported if IEP teams were more intentional about asking students their goals around friendship and making it easier for them to express if their accommodations are being met or not.**





FCSN Connections

FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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