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Focus: Parent & Community Engagement

Net Capital – Technology Tools that Support Community Leadership

by Laurie Posner, M.P.A.

Just as we rounded the corner into the 21st century, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam warned that our society might very well be falling apart. In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), Putnam drew on extensive data, including more than 500,000 interviews, to find that social ties among friends, family and democratic structures were breaking down, leaving us with far less social capital. Fewer people were taking part in the political process or taking up leadership in social and civic groups. We were still bowling, Putnam found – but not in leagues. We were bowling alone.

A World of New Information, but in a Read-Only Format

Bowling Alone suggested that television and computers were part of the problem, as the combination of late 20th century technologies tended to isolate and remove us from the public square. Television had reached near universal adoption in U.S. homes in the late 1990s. And this medium, from the late 1920s onward, had sharply distinguished broadcasters from viewers and relegated the latter to a generally passive role.

Expansive as it was, the early web typically followed suit. While Web 1.0 linked up (“hyperlinked”) large knowledge sets and brought the messages of broadcasters,

webmasters and merchandisers to the public, it rarely caused publics to interact with webcasters or to one another. Whether mapping out human-machine contact (“user interfaces”) or ascribing new affiliations and identities (“usernames”), the early web would promote a “designer-user” relationship, much like the “broadcaster-viewer” dualism that preceded it. Not everyone was on board.

As scholar Don Norman said: “I am on a crusade to get rid of the word ‘users.’ I would rather call them ‘people.’” (2008). Fortunately, the web would evolve. Darcy DiNucci observed in “Fragmented Future” (1999), “The Web we know now...is only an embryo of the Web to come... [Web 2.0] will be understood not as screenfuls of text and graphics but as a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens.”

The Social Web

Web 2.0 – which came into focus around 1999 – signaled a move away from the static interface and toward more interaction and collaboration. As interactive online platforms, speed and mobility expanded, while the costs of desktop production fell, more and more people produced their own content, in real time. Portmanteaus like *blog* (web+log), coined around 1997, became commonplace fixtures of a version 2 web. And the Internet soon

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“The core of our dream must value young people – all young people. We cannot afford to value some schools and not others, some neighborhoods and not others, some ethnic or racial group and not others, some families and not others.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

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buzzed with social networks, bookmarking sites, media sharing, wikis, mashups and folksonomies. Expanding on web 2.0, we see the emergence of 3.0 possibilities, which capitalize on distributed databases, natural language processing, and machine learning to create a more “connected, open and intelligent” web (Spivak, 2007). In the realm of school reform, these new tools have opened up new possibilities for leadership and activism. Here are three examples.

The Call for College Readiness – Interactive Data. In the United States today, there is a 45 percent gap in the share of poor students earning bachelor’s degrees vs. their wealthy peers (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). In Texas’ Rio Grande Valley – where about one in three families lives in poverty – IDRA and our partners are working to expand college-readiness and close this access gap. IDRA’s online OurSchool portal is a critical part of this work. The portal is organized around IDRA’s Quality Schools Action Framework, which allows for framing, benchmarking and tracking collaborative work to strengthen schools (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010) and incorporates many components of the more data-rich, social web (Posner & Bojorquez, 2008; Grayson, 2011).

Educators and family leaders, like the members of the ARISE South Tower PTA Comunitario, are using the portal’s flexible, bilingual (English/Spanish) platform to examine how many high school students in the Rio Grande Valley are taking and scoring at or above criterion on college-readiness exams; how many are transferring to two- and four-year colleges or universities; and, once in college, how many

must (re-)take developmental courses. They are using the portal’s “open surveys” feature to augment the portal with expanded local data (Montemayor, 2007; Montemayor & Goodman, 2011) to create “my schools” portfolios and to track and share progress.

One PTA Comunitario member noted: “Nos ayuda en comprender más como funciona el sistema en la educación, [incluyendo] los temas por ejemplo como HB3, financiamiento justo, STAAR, derechos de padres, y también desarrolla el liderazgo en la educación. Nos organizamos para abogar en áreas que se necesita” (“It has helped us to understand how the educational system works – for example, HB3, fair funding, STAAR, and parents’ rights – to develop [our] leadership in education – and organize ourselves to advocate in needed areas”).

Community Capacity-Building – Social Networks. More than 80 community leaders are connected online through an online network that IDRA developed for Equal Voice - Rio Grande Valley, a powerful collaborative of grassroots community based-organizations, funded by the Marguerite Casey Foundation, that advocate for health, education, housing, employment, and immigration policies and practices that create equal opportunity for poor and working families. Members use the network to share research, data and analyses of issues impacting low-income families; collaborate on events; and capture and document progress and achievements. The Equal Voice – RGV network facilitates content creation, with a platform for discussions, blogs, photo- and video-sharing, news feeds, announcements and calendars, in a password-protected,

ad-free environment. Facebook, for all its challenges, helped to bring online networking and real-time content production and content sharing to scale (Vance, 2012), enabling people to capture and communicate stories of impact as they are being written.

Advocating Funding Equity – Crowd-mapping. Parents and educators are using IDRA’s School Funding Crowdmap to report how funding cuts to education, enacted by Texas’ legislature in 2011, impacted their schools. The map is part of a set of interactive tools – from searchable data on funding cuts by district and county; to the School Finance Trial dashboard; to RSS news feeds – developed as part of IDRA’s Fair Funding Now! initiative, a partnership of IDRA, LULAC, MALDEF, NAACP, MASBA, the Texas Center for Education Policy at UT Austin.

Using School Funding Crowdmap (<https://schoolfunding.crowdmap.com/>), a teacher from Schertz, reported how funding cuts have increased class sizes from 37 to 39 students. A family in San Antonio is struggling to keep their two sons in college, given cuts to means-based loans. A mother in Brownsville worries about her children’s long walk home now that so many school bus stops have been cut. And a teacher in Alief, even with a second job, is struggling to make ends meet. Her wages have been cut; she has to buy more school supplies out of pocket; and with the rise in lunch prices, she is helping more students with lunch money.

While being online is certainly not the same as being engaged, there is good reason to believe that Web 2.0 and 3.0 technologies can
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The IDRA Newsletter (ISSN 1069-5672, ©2013) serves as a vehicle for communication with educators, school board members, decision-makers, parents, and the general public concerning the educational needs of all children in Texas and across the United States.

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Portions of the contents of this newsletter were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and endorsement by the federal government should not be assumed.

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Families Engaging Each Other to Improve Schools IDRA's Annual *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute™

by Frances M. Guzmán, M.Ed.

In the United States, schools have a long tradition of equating student success with family involvement. Just like motherhood and apple pie, family engagement in schools is the accepted mantra and expectation. Of course quality instruction and resources also have much to do with student success, but many accept the notion that family engagement is one very important aspect of student growth and ultimate success.

Research indicates positive contributions to students' academic and social gains when active partnerships exist between home, school and community (Blank, et al., 2003; Caspe, et al., 2006/07; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Kreider, et al., 2007; Weiss, et al., 2006). Since this is the general philosophy embraced by almost all publics concerned with education, federal, state and local entities have enacted specific policies, regulations and targeted monies for family engagement.

So while in theory no one argues with the philosophy of family involvement, the type of engagement has been a loosely defined arena. The last 40 years emphasized the accepted and traditional aspects of family involvement. These centered on providing parenting information, volunteering and fundraising activities, or what was referred to in the field as "random acts of parent involvement" (Gil Kressley, 2008). These implied that something had to *happen to or be done to* parents or that only lower level activities would be what families could do with schools. In this paradigm, families were not seen as partners but rather as assistants to the educational process.

More recently though, involvement of families has been determined to be more about active partnerships that drive school reform (Christenson & Reschly, 2009) and promote student achievement. Along these lines, IDRA has been ahead of the curve in its research and its 40 years of field experience with the development of a change model, the Quality Schools Action

Framework™ (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010). This model outlines how all stakeholders (families, schools, communities) can be involved in schools. Irrespective of socioeconomic status, home language, literacy and formal education, families are valued, are given opportunities to obtain actionable knowledge and with support are able to act on that knowledge. In other words, they can and do interact with the school setting by being equal partners in the education of their children.

Active family engagement, where parents serve as catalysts for change, always has been a tenet of IDRA's mission to assure educational opportunity for every child. It was put in practice as early as the 1980s, when IDRA and the then Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs held training institutes in Texas for parents of children in bilingual education. From the outset, these institutes were bilingual, highly participatory, and most especially honored and used the information that families brought from home. Also, these institutes had research-based data and information about bilingual/ESL education. From this work, the development of the IDRA Family Leadership in Education model began (Montemayor, 2011).

This model explored, researched and established the four dimensions or roles of family leadership: the parent as first teacher, the parent as a resource to the school, the parent as a decision-maker, and the parent as a trainer and leader to other parents. Not being lock-step or linear but circular in nature, this model identified how families could be involved in whichever dimension or dimensions they chose. (Montemayor, 2011)

What followed, using different funding sources and in collaboration with state and national associations, were conferences for parents by parents using the four dimensions of family leadership as the basis for the presentations. Parents and (cont. on Page 4)

A passive, traditional role of parent involvement has morphed into an action-based, participatory, advocacy family engagement role for families.

IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

For more information about the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or contact@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at http://www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity/

funded by the U.S. Department of Education

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IDRA staff presented together. These conferences were used as labs to involve families in leadership development. In 1998, IDRA designed the Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Early Childhood Educators' Institute™. In conjunction with this educators' conference, IDRA had sessions for parents on early childhood. By 2000, the Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute™ became known for its innovation in showcasing parents as presenters.

Today, IDRA's parent institute attracts participants from throughout Texas and continues to grow in numbers and visibility. It is held in San Antonio in April and is bilingual (Spanish/English) in its presentations and materials, is highly participatory, and has parents serve as the premier presenters. The parent presenters are recruited from throughout the country and given support (training, examples and practice) in order to develop their one-hour presentations. The institute reinforces the fourth dimension of parents as trainer and leaders. In addition to the educational topic presentations, the institute has exhibits, interviews, advocacy and evaluation activities.

A concurrent event of the institute is a special administrator session, which deals specifically with family engagement strategies at the local level. The presentation topics range from pre-kindergarten to college at the different levels (elementary, middle, high school and college) so that participants have many choices to learn about different educational issues. The sessions are research-based, action-oriented, real-life experiences of the presenters.

Several of the parent presenters from the institute have now been invited to conduct sessions at other local and state events. Here are some comments from parents who attended last year's institute:

- "The cool thing about presenting here is that we are all parents, and we want the best for our children, so there is a deep understanding, and so there is no fear."
- "The fact that everybody was engaged, was participating; this is something I don't see in any other conference. [In other conferences], people just go and listen. Here people come to participate to be engaged – that was impressive!"
- "The fact is that sometimes parents feel

IDRA 40th Anniversary

In March of 2009, some 20 parents gathered to explore forming their own community-based official PTA unit. Most were fluent only in Spanish, and all were poor. All of the schools their children attended were either academically challenged or feeders to low-achieving secondary schools. Through a partnership between the community-based ARISE Centers and IDRA, the founding of the country's first PTA Comunitario demonstrates IDRA's Family Leadership in Education Mode in action. Today, IDRA is helping more communities in the Texas Rio Grande Valley start their own PTA Comunitarios to partner with their schools to ensure success of all students. (See Page 5 for details.)



ARISE South Tower PTA Comunitario officers and members with Texas PTA president.

constrained because of their limited mastery of English. We learned here that this does not have to be so. There are many ways in which parents can participate regardless of their English dominance. In this conference, we are realizing that there is no limit to what we can do."

By design, IDRA intends that the participants who see parents presenting, will in turn go back to their respective districts and communities and replicate the learning in their own settings. In 2013, IDRA is moving toward this replication goal by working with several community-based PTA Comunitarios in South Texas to organize and implement their own version of parent institutes using the Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute™ as the model for dealing with local educational issues (see Page 5).

A passive, traditional role of parent involvement has morphed into an action-based, participatory, advocacy family engagement role for families. With more research indicating academic success is fostered when families are engaged in meaningful, action-based reform, then parents learning and acting on educational issues is a process to move forward. Our children certainly deserve nothing less!

The next Annual IDRA La Semana del Niño Parent Institute™ will be held in San Antonio on April 25. See www.idra.org for details.

Resources

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- Caspe, M., & M.E. Lopez, C. Wolos. "Family Involvement in Elementary School Children's Education," *Family Involvement Makes a Difference, Research Brief No. 2* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard Family Research Project, Winter 2006-07).
- Christensen, S.L., & A.L. Reschly (Eds.) *Handbook of School-Family Partnerships*. New York, N.Y.: Routledge Publishers, 2009).
- Henderson, A.T., & K. Mapp. *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002).
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PTA Comunitario as a Family Leadership Model – An “Investing in Innovation I3 Project”

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

PTA Comunitarios are a new response to the challenges of effective family-school-community partnerships. Schools and parent organizations need successful family engagement processes that go beyond traditional family participation. The original official PTA Comunitario is in its fourth year of operation and is growing in membership, expectations and goals set and in taking on education issues. Themes of the meetings include examining the impact of the state accountability system and high-stakes tests, analyzing the state’s graduation requirements, and the re-introduction of a minimum diploma track that steers students away from college.

The new type of PTA functions in a grassroots community organization with meetings held in the native language of participants, in this case Spanish. Members are mostly poor, recent immigrants from unincorporated communities on the fringes of towns. Rotating leadership emerges from these families. Meetings are highly participatory with specific education-related training. Home visitors (*promotoras*) engage families and organize transportation networks to meetings and events.

The role of families in partnering with schools to create excellence for all children is growing though still not central in the research and literature of parent involvement in education. Institutional improvement through community-school partnerships needs much more evidence and proof in the field. Emerging research is highlighting family-school-community partnerships. In S. Hong’s *A Cord of Three Strands: A New Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools*, a strong partnership between a community organization and schools focuses on the power of an external organization providing support for family leadership and campus participation. Other references reinforcing the community-family-school relationships are Ferguson, et al., (2010); Henderson, A.T. (2011); Orr & Rogers (2011); Robledo

Montecel & Goodman (2010); and Weiss, et al. (2010).

IDRA’s PTA Comunitario project has now been funded with a four-year grant by the U.S. Department of Education’s Investing in Innovation (I3) program to further develop the process and rigorously document and evaluate the successful practice in expansion to 20 campuses in five school districts. IDRA’s Family Leadership in Education Principles are distilled from four decades of experience and advocacy and have come to fruition in this project. At stake is extending and replicating an effective model of family engagement to transform schools to serve poor children well.

Central to the project are the following components: (1) meetings attended by parents, grandparents, students’ older siblings, neighbors and all who consider themselves custodians of children’s academic success and future education; (2) group projects, like campus visitations to introduce the new organization, open hearings with school board member candidates, and large public events to protest draconian cuts to the state education budget; and (3) multiple opportunities for shared leadership in organizing and carrying out education-related projects. (None of the current projects have involved local fundraising – a caveat set by the original sponsoring organization.)

For the national and state level PTA membership goals, with concerns about diminishing membership, PTA Comunitario offers a process to engage families who have not received effective outreach and in fact are not very interested in the traditional parent organization.

For Title I campuses required to organize and document parent meetings and events, PTA Comunitario offers an effective outreach process that brings concrete and powerful

(cont. on Page 6)

Families care about their children’s education and are to be treated with respect, dignity and value. Deficit and family-blaming approaches aren’t just disrespectful, they don’t work. Families, schools and communities, when drawn together, become a strong, sustainable voice to protect the rights of all children.

(PTA Comunitario, continued from Page 5)

family engagement results. Families previously disconnected and thought-to-be-unconcerned become dynamic and fruitful partners.

Families care about their children's education and are to be treated with respect, dignity and value. Deficit and family-blaming approaches aren't just disrespectful, they don't work. Families, schools and communities, when drawn together, become a strong, sustainable voice to protect the rights of all children. These families from the most underserved, least connected communities are their children's strongest advocates for an excellent and efficacious education.

Considering the policy threats to keeping schools open, educators must engage and partner with family allies who can be ferocious advocates to keep schools flourishing successfully in their barrios. The PTA Comunitario response requires new outreach that is both labor intensive and personal. As schools and organizations adapt to new patterns, the status quo becomes bold new partnerships and transformed schools. The ultimate benefits are children learning, growing and succeeding in school.

Resources

- Ferguson, C., & C. Jordan, M. Baldwin. *Working Systematically in Action: Engaging Family & Community* (Austin, Texas: SEDL, 2010).
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provide for more resources for local-, school- and community-based leadership, than their Web 1.0 progenitors. Ultimately, it is not the medium alone but we who shape, define and interact with it – and more crucially, with one another – that will determine whether these technologies deepen or weaken knowledge and our sense of connection and whether we translate this into action that benefits children. But if new strategies taken up by our partners are any guide, the potential for transparency and transformation is definitely in the air.

Resources

- Bailey, M., & S. Dynarski. "Inequality in Postsecondary Education," in *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality and the Uncertain Life Chances of Low-Income Children*, edited by G.J. Duncan & R.J. Murnane (New York, N.Y.: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).
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- Norman, D. "Words Matter. Talk About People: Not Customers, Not Consumers, Not Users," online article (Don Norman: Designing For People website)
- Posner, L., & H. Bojorquez. "Knowledge for Action – Organizing School-Community Partnerships Around Quality Data," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, January 2008).
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- School Funding Crowdmap
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- Links to research on parent and community engagement
- Flier on IDRA's four dimensions of parent leadership in education
- Full statement: "Court Rules: Texas School Funding Must Serve All Students Equitably," with resource links (infographics, video, slideshow, etc.)

Visit www.idra.org for more information.

Court Rules: Texas School Funding Must Serve All Students Equitably

Editor's Note: The following is excerpted from a statement by Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO, about the Texas District Court ruling on the Texas school finance system, February 4, 2013. The full statement and resources are available online at www.idra.org.

The ruling by the Texas District Court, Judge John Dietz presiding, that the Texas school finance system as currently constructed violates the Texas Constitution affirms what communities and educators have known for years. Our state clearly is not providing the resources necessary to educate all children to the high levels that are needed in the 21st century.

Dr. Albert Cortez, IDRA's Director of Policy, was among those presenting testimony in the *Texas Taxpayer and Student Fairness Coalition vs. Michael Williams, et al.*, school funding trial in Austin. Based on our analyses, IDRA concluded that the Texas school finance system is inequitable, provides inadequate levels of funding for educating English language learners and low-income students, and has disparate impacts on low property wealth and major urban school districts. IDRA studies also show that cuts to special program disproportionately impact students in low wealth school districts.

In his closing remarks from the bench, Judge Dietz emphasized the importance of moving away from a deficit mentality and the need for change in the way some view certain children. "At first blush, we let our pre-judgments guide our thinking. We see these students that are economically disadvantaged and think, 'Oh my, they haven't had the background I've had, English is not their primary language, and how are they ever going to succeed?' We tend to concentrate on the deficits..." He then called on Texans to "focus on the potential" of every child.

In its closing argument, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) referenced IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework and noted that resources are an essential component needed to support local

governance and efforts to provide high quality teaching and instructional materials in all schools.

This case undoubtedly will move to the Texas Supreme Court. However, the legislature has the authority today to take the necessary steps to make things right by providing fair funding for the common good. Specifically, consonant with the ruling of the district court, IDRA calls for the following.

- **The time for increased and equitable funding is now – What is needed are critical resources, not more time.** Given the breadth of the court ruling and the facts of the case, it is clear that the adoption of an equitable school funding plan that provides all school districts the resources needed to educate children to the high levels is needed – and needed now. And while some state leaders are publicly speaking about delaying action during this legislative session until after a Texas Supreme Court ruling, Texans are calling for action now. The San Antonio Express-News editors, for example stated, "The irresponsible approach [of waiting] is harmful to the future of Texas." With the likelihood that the ruling will be upheld by the Texas Supreme Court, it is not unreasonable to start framing a suitable plan now. Our children deserve serious and focused attention.
- **Special population funding increases are required.** After weeks of testimony, the court concluded that all schools serving the state's special population students, particularly those in the process of learning English and those from low-income backgrounds, require higher levels of funding than provided in current state formulas. After decades of neglect, Texas needs to increase funding for compensatory education and ELL weights to 40 percent, as indicated by the research literature.
- **Target revenue and hold-harmless funding should be ended with no more phasing out.** The trial testimony made reference to the significant inequities continued as result of target revenue funding. Elimina-

tion of this alternative dis-equalizing funding scheme is absolutely essential. However any plan to phase out target revenue over several years would be hazardous. Similar schemes to phase out hold-harmless funding (money that school districts receive despite not qualifying for it under the regular funding formulae) over a multi-year span only served to perpetuate inequities that were created as far back as 1993. The argument that high wealth school districts need time to adjust ignores the fact they have already had decades to do so.

- **Public funding must be reserved for public schools.** The court ruled that funding for public schools must be made more adequate and more equitable. To achieve this goal, the state must not divert state funding to private education, including providing tax breaks for businesses to divert tax monies to contributions designed to support private school vouchers. Such proposals would result in diminishing the resources available to fairly fund public schools – as mandated by the court. Diverting public money away from public schools would do nothing to address the current crisis and would create dual school systems: one separate for the few and one under-funded for the many.
- **Facilities funding priority should be given to public schools.** The state of Texas has long been negligent in addressing the facilities funding needs of the majority of its public schools. Though the court did not comment on this issue, priority in addressing long-neglected facilities needs should be given to those public schools that have waited patiently for their opportunity to get state support to remodel, upgrade or replace old, outdated classrooms, laboratories and similar instructional areas.

Texas has struggled with education funding for a very long time. In fact, as IDRA celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2013, we remember the same debates from the early 1970s that would have schools value some students over others. Forty years is far too long. It is time for Texas to provide equal educational opportunity for all children.



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Focus: Parent & Community Engagement

“Children need places that are safe, that are nurturing, that welcome their families, that welcome their culture, their language and have them really be able to learn and prepare themselves for life.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

Intercultural Development Research Association

Classnotes Podcast



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