Sustaining Expanded Learning Programs:

A Manual for Implementing Family Fees

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ASPIRE
After School Programs In Region 11

Partnership for Children & Youth

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OVERVIEW

It is vital to the quality and sustainability of publicly funded expanded learning programs across California to diversify the funding sources they rely on. Charging family fees is one funding strategy some expanded learning programs across California have implemented to meet the cost of providing high-quality programs. After multiple requests from practitioners in the field for more guidance about how to implement family fees, the Partnership for Children & Youth (PCY) and the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) Expanded Learning Technical Assistance Unit partnered to produce this manual. Grounded in experience and examples from program providers across California, this manual provides insight to program leaders considering if and how to implement family fees. This manual focuses on After School Education and Safety (ASES) programs, but many of these strategies can apply to other expanded learning programs, including summer.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES

Program Examples

Examples of how expanded learning programs have implemented family fees will appear throughout this manual.

Important Note: The Expanded Learning Division (EXLD) of the California Department of Education was involved in the review of this manual from a compliance perspective only. Readers should not assume that this is guidance from the EXLD as to how to move forward instituting program fees. It is not the intention of the Partnership for Children & Youth, nor the Los Angeles County Office of Education Expanded Learning Technical Assistance Unit to imply that the practices highlighted here are the only ways to implement family fees.

WHY LEVERAGE FAMILY FEES?

Research on high-quality expanded learning programs has shown that on average, the cost of operation is $21-24 per child/per day, which is almost triple the current After School Education and Safety (ASES) reimbursement rate of $8.19 per child/per day.[1] Over the last ten years, this rate has remained relatively stagnant despite increasing costs associated with a nearly 50% increase in the minimum wage and a double digit increase in the Consumer Price Index. It is clear that this relatively flat funding has had negative impacts on the quality of ASES programs, especially in staff retention, recruitment, and professional development support. A 2016 after school field survey conducted by the Partnership for Children & Youth (PCY) found: 92% of respondents said they had been negatively impacted by the flat funding, 86% said they found it more difficult to attract and retain highly qualified staff, and 64% had to reduce staff hours. In service of combating these challenges and to support high-quality programming, PCY conducted research to gain insight into using family fees as a possible funding source. This research included interviews of 15 ASES programs (diverse in geography and size), as well as input from over 150 program providers statewide, and will be cited throughout this document.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING FAMILY FEES

PCY found that the two primary benefits of charging fees were:

- **Unrestricted Funding:** The unrestricted funding raised by fees can be used to increase program quality and/or expand learning opportunities to more students and their families. Programs can use this funding to support additional staff planning hours, maintain full-time site coordinators, offer field trips to students, pay for administrative costs, meet the ASES required match, and more. One third of programs reported that the greatest benefit of family fees was generating the necessary revenue to maintain quality staff.
- **Family Engagement:** Half of all programs in PCY's research stated that implementing family fees deepened buy-in, awareness, and engagement of families. Implementing fees provides a forum to build awareness and relationships with families about the positive student outcomes and experiences that result from quality programs, as well as the full costs of operating these programs.

It is important to note that charging family fees does come with some challenges; the two most commonly cited were:

- **Administration:** The number one challenge cited by providers is the initial increase in administration and paperwork that comes with fees. That said, program administrators have experience navigating changes in administrative standards and requirements that are commonplace in publicly funded programs.
- **Parent Buy-in:** It is a culture shift for both program staff and parents to have discussions about money. Serving families with fewer financial resources is central to the ASES program, so program administrators and staff are sensitive to ensuring that fees do not place significant financial burden on families. However, less than 1/3 of all programs shared that they had moderate push back from parents during the process of implementing fees.

Almost 90% of the ASES programs interviewed regarding family fees recommend it as a viable sustainability option. Overall, the foundation to launching successful family fees is a strong relationship based on transparency and partnership with school day leaders and parents.

It is clear from the dozens of interviews and case studies that charging reasonable fees and ensuring all kids have access to expanded learning opportunities regardless of their economic status are not mutually exclusive.

1 *The Cost of Quality Out-of-School-Time Programs*, The Wallace Foundation, 2009.

ALIGNING WITH THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Expanded Learning Division of the California Department of Education (CDE) supports and promotes implementing family fees. Michael Funk, Expanded Learning Division Director, stated:

> "Expanded Learning programs cannot rely solely on an increase in the state or federal daily rate for sustainability or quality. Should the discussion of family fees be on the table? Absolutely. And the families should be part of the discussion! The plan must be equitable and fair. No child should be turned away because the family cannot afford the fee. However, we can't assume that low-income families would not be willing to pay something for the opportunity for their children to learn and be loved and safe."

Previously vague language in the California Education Code stating that a program "is not required to charge family fees" led to inconsistent messaging, according to programs interviewed across different regions. As a result, many programs and school districts had concluded that CDE was not supportive of family fees.

With the passage of Assembly Bill 2615 (effective January 2017), which was sponsored by CDE, the California Education Code was revised to more clearly state that charging family fees is allowable. This change provides more clarity in the law, and creates a space to promote the value and opportunity of implementing family fees, while still protecting vulnerable student groups.

CDE states that the following factors must be taken into consideration when implementing fees (AB2615 FAQs – EC sections 8422[c] and 8482.6[a]):

- A program is prohibited from charging a fee to a family for a child if the program knows that child is a homeless youth or for a child who is in foster care.
- A program shall waive or reduce the cost of program fees for any child who is eligible for Free and Reduced Priced Meals (FRPM).
- Any fees collected by programs shall be used for program activities, services to children, and administrative costs.

The CDE guidance also states that all programs "keep accurate records of fees collected, and fees should be tracked separately from the grant funds received." A foundational tenet of this education code and current practice is that no child can be turned away from a publicly funded after school program because of their inability to pay.

It is important to note that data on FRPM status and other student groups (such as homeless and foster youth) can be provided by the school district to their sites or community-based partner. Data-sharing agreements and infrastructure between schools and community partners is different in each district. Data-sharing is a best practice not only for fees, but also for program sustainability and continuous quality improvement.

GETTING STARTED

Every expanded learning program is unique and has different considerations when weighing the viability of various types of funding. The providers interviewed highlighted key considerations for new programs considering charging family fees:

- Your program must already be a high-quality expanded learning experience for youth; something parents are willing to invest in.

- The additional revenue brought in with family fees alone will not solve a budget crisis because 1) implementation can take several years, 2) it will include upfront costs, and 3) there is a limit to what families being served by ASES programs can afford due to their financial status.
- It is critical that the family fees be accessible for parents, and not undermine the ASES program mission to serve all students regardless of ability to pay.
- Programs should be diligently organized from the beginning of the process.

PLANNING TIMELINE

Implementing family fees is a complex undertaking that will take time to fine-tune. It is important to keep the process simple and be open to change as you learn what works and does not work for your organization and community. Some programs started out testing the implementation of fees in a few sites before going to scale, given the heavy upfront lift and investment. Regardless of your strategy for roll-out, it is important to plan out some key milestones:

- **12 months out:** Develop an implementation plan. Collect data and consider fiscal and administrative options.
- **9 months out:** Initiate a purposeful stakeholder engagement strategy, including district meetings, parent orientations, etc.
- **6 months out:** Finalize structures and roles for managing administrative tasks.
- **Annual review:** Review ongoing data on revenue collected and parent/partner feedback to continuously improve process and update fees as needed.

THINK TOGETHER

Think Together — Initial Planning Timeline

FALL

a. Develop a communication plan for parents in building value of program and awareness of sustainability challenges
b. Develop a communication plan for district partner meetings
c. Develop a communication plan for site level administrators

JANUARY

d. Continue communication
e. Schedule district meetings
f. Start planning internal administrative pieces to collect/process fees

FEBRUARY

g. Hold district meetings
h. Communicate with internal stakeholders as needed

MARCH - JUNE

i. Finalize with each district
j. Get approvals from Board
k. Finalize administrative practices and training for staff
l. Produce communication pieces
m. Train staff on collecting family fees
n. Schedule parent meetings as needed
o. Collect fees with fall registration
p. Work out any challenges and create internal best practices through ongoing communication
q. Hold frequent internal meetings around administrative and accounting pieces

ANAHEIM FAMILY YMCA

Anaheim Family YMCA — Annual Planning Timeline

When thinking through the new family fee for the upcoming year, this program engages in the following planning timeline:

January–March: Review any anticipated increase to program expenses/costs (ex: minimum wage, contract fees, transportation, merit increases, etc.).

April–January: Decide the percentage increase based on the new expenses/costs and notify parents with at least a 30-day written notice.

July 1: Implement the new rate.

DETERMINING FEES

Programs have several choices as to the types of family fees they can implement in their program. PCY's research identified the types of fees:

- **Registration Fee:** Annual fee charged during the application or enrollment process
  - Approximately 45% of programs interviewed charge only an annual registration fee; annual registration fees ranged from $40–$100 per child
- **Monthly or Quarterly Fee:** Recurring fees charged at regular intervals throughout the year
  - Approximately 40% of programs charge only a monthly fee; monthly fees ranged from $10–$200 per child
- **Late Fees:** Fee charged when family is late to pick up child
  - Approximately 13% (only two of the 15 programs interviewed) charge late fees on top of registration and/or monthly fees

Note: Some programs charged both registration and monthly fees

All family fees should be considered as income or revenue in the program's budget and fiscal system. Be conservative in your projections for how much revenue family fees might generate for your program. It is important to be cautious in these estimates in order to prevent your program from fiscally overextending itself.[2] Additionally, experienced programs noted that it takes time to implement fees and for revenue projections to be fully realized. Some districts and/or community-based providers may already have existing fee-based programs operating, making it easier to build off of existing processes and infrastructure.

Overall, the programs surveyed estimated that revenue from family fees ranges from 10–25% of the total program budget, depending on how long fees have been implemented, amount charged, and percentage of families that contribute.

All ASES programs interviewed use a sliding scale based on income, need, and/or family size. Families unable to cover the fee should receive waivers for free or reduced rates. Programs have a range of ways to determine these scales based on local community factors (outlined below). Some programs also accept in-kind donations in lieu of financial support which included parents volunteering time and/or supplies. Most programs interviewed also have different payment plan options to meet the needs of families. As noted in examples below, fees are not set in stone and most programs revisit the fee structure annually or every several years.

When determining the type and amount of fees to charge, it is helpful to understand the range of fees that families might expect based on the geographical area and comparable services. It is recommended that you use multiple sources of information to help set the range of fees. Multiple interviewees conducted market research to inform their fee amounts.

2 Filling the Gap: Funding Strategies for California's After School Programs, Partnership for Children & Youth, 2008.

Below are some options for resources to use:

- ❖ Consult with your local child care planning council to inquire about the fees charged in school-age child care.

  Resource: http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/lpccontacts.asp

- ❖ Review the most recent results of CDE's Regional Market Rate Ceilings, which calculate the market rates for child care in each of California's 58 counties.

  Resource: http://www3.cde.ca.gov/rcscc/index.aspx

- ❖ Look at CDE's family fees schedule for the maximum fee amount that CDE child care providers can charge eligible families based on family size and income level.

  Resource: https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ci/mb1711.asp

- ❖ Reach out to your local parks and recreation departments as many charge fees for recreation, tutoring, and camps, which might be similar to expanded learning programs.

  Resource: http://www.cprs.org/page/cprs-staff

YMCA SILICON VALLEY

YMCA Silicon Valley — Increasing Fees Over Time

When this program started to charge fees, they had a 3-year plan that budgeted the percentage of families expected to pay each year– i.e. Year 1—50% of families, Year 2—75%, and Year 3—85%. This program understood that projections had to be conservative and planned over time. This program determines fees each year in the early spring to allow for pre-registration. Pre-registering families in April–May is preferred. Spaces are always left available at the beginning of the year for students who are foster or homeless youth, as well as teacher-referred students. Once the annual fees are determined, this program offers parents the opportunity to split fees into a series of payments over a ten month period (September–May) to help families plan for this expense. This method of payments can also help on the backend administration for payments and collections. They have found it is helpful to start at a lower amount for the first year ($25–$30) and then, as parent buy-in grows, increase each year to account for minimum wage increases, vendor increases, etc.

MONROVIA USD

Monrovia Unified School District — Multiple Types of Family Contribution

This program encourages families to contribute and partner with the program in one of three ways: monthly monetary contributions (fees), monthly donations of supplies needed at the site (in-kind), volunteering time at the site or the central office (time). The parent volunteers are a critical aspect of their program's quality. They have a high degree of parental participation in the program by having 3 different ways families can contribute. The program also has a tiered fee structure for students who receive Free and Reduced Price Meals.

ANAHEIM FAMILY YMCA

Anaheim Family YMCA — Determining Fees Based on Costs

The Expanded Learning Director creates a budget proposal for a site. This way the site can determine how much it actually costs to run the program. The family fee established reflects the difference in the dollar amount that the grant is not covering. If a site has to increase the family fee amount, it is recommended to keep it at an average of 3–5% increase per year (based on the cost of living increase), as anything over that amount could prove to be a hardship for families.

WHITTIER CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Whittier City School District — Tiers for Families with Multiple Children

At this program there is a $40 annual registration fee per child, with "breaks for families with multiple children in the program" (ex: 2 children = $80, 3 children = $110, and 4 children = $140). The family fees are payable in cash at the program's central office, to the Site Facilitator at the school site or online via PayPal: https://wcsd-ca.schoolloop.com/reachforthestars. Instructions for families can be found on the website link provided under After School Registration.

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

PARENTS

According to the PCY research, the greatest added benefit from implementing family fees that programs cited was increased buy-in from the parents. While getting parents on board is one of the most common challenges, parent engagement can become the greatest asset for a program, if done intentionally. Across the programs there was a broad range in the percentage of parents that paid fees, from 20% of parents on the low end to 90%. The majority of programs have between 40–70% of their parents paying fees. The Free or Reduced Price Meals (FRPM) percentages of a program site was just one factor in this wide variation of parents that paid fees. According to interviewees, it is important to remember this when doing your conservative forecasting for the first couple of years of implementing fees. Hosting parent orientations was cited as essential to all programs in order to build investment and establish transparent communication.

Key strategies identified by programs to achieve parent buy-in include:

❖ **Build Awareness:**
- Show parents the breakdown of the costs, budget, and gaps
- Explain the current statewide policies that impact the program, i.e. increases in state minimum wages, ASES rate campaign
- Clearly demonstrate the program benefits
- Compare fees to regional childcare costs

❖ **Engaged Communication:**
- Get input from parents through surveys, focus groups, or other regular meetings/events
- Outline the array of program services via mandatory parent orientations and handbooks
- Coordinate with the school site office or district to provide parents with consistent messaging around the reasons for implementing fees

❖ **Intentional Administration:**
- Create a simple process for collecting paperwork and fees
- Provide parents very early notice before implementing fees
- Establish clear timelines
- Be intentional about the phase-in of costs to allow parents time to adjust

Focusing on transparency and honesty was one of the most common recommendations from all programs when working with parents. Multiple providers stated that over time a greater proportion of parents contribute something (including in-kind contributions) as it becomes the new normal. This is especially true for younger children, as parents have come to expect some level of contribution associated with childcare, and they want their children to have access to safe learning experiences staffed by caring adults.

DISTRICT/SCHOOL BOARD

Prior to PCY's research, one potential barrier identified was getting buy-in and/or approval from districts. In the group of programs interviewed, however, that was not the case. Only 20% of all programs mentioned their districts being initially hesitant, but all were eventually supportive. Getting district approval and buy-in, regardless of who operates the program, is a prerequisite and needs to happen early on in the process. There can be different implications for relationship-building, communication, and planning processes depending on if the program is operated by a school district or a community-based organization (CBO), and/or the history of the existing partnerships. In these conversations, it is important to identify which entities will be the lead in roles such as determining fees, collecting/tracking money, and/or notifying parents. Similar to parent investment, district buy-in is rooted in open communication from the start with a clear plan for implementation. It is necessary to share the financial forecasting for the first few years of implementation, along with details on how these additional funds will directly increase the quality of the program for all students, regardless of their ability to pay the fees.

THINK TOGETHER

Think Together — Engaging Parents and Districts in Parallel

This provider worked with both stakeholder groups (parents and districts) at the same time to move family fee implementation forward. They took a parallel track engaging both parents and districts by utilizing the following strategies:

1. Building awareness around the wage pressures, lack of increase in funding, and the potential impact
2. Focusing on students' experience and perspective about the value of the program
3. Utilizing local child care costs as a data point
4. Focusing on programmatic outcomes

At the same time, the program worked with district partners very early in the year to expose them to the actual cost of running the program, increased wage pressures, and the potential impact on staff and the program if a solution was not identified.

It is important to note that the process was very different across districts for approval of the family fees. Some districts wanted to survey parents to test their appetite for fees and set a threshold for how much they could charge.

One critical step this program recommends is that the initial communication about implementing a family fee should come from both the district and partners, not just the CBO partner. This level of support from the district helped in the start-up phase. This program also had to have all of this done in the spring because families pay at the time of registration, which for many schools/districts is at the end of the school year for fall enrollment.

BUTTE COUNTY

Butte County Office of Education — Keeping Costs Clear to Families

This program started charging a $20 annual registration fee in 2009 and increased it to $30 in 2015. The fee for a family of three or more students is $80. It is emphasized to families that the funds stay at the site level and are used to support the purchase of curriculum materials and resources. On the registration cover letter, the program highlights the average monthly cost of fee-based after school programs ($1,500 per year), so families can see the value in a fee of $3 per month. Fee waivers are offered for families who cannot afford the $30. These waivers are signed by the parent or guardian and are granted using the honor system.

MONROVIA USD

Monrovia Unified School District — Ensuring Family Participation

Families have bought into contributing to the program monetarily because the program is transparent with their budget, including its ASES grant amounts and the need to charge families in order to keep the program running. The program hosts Town Halls at least twice a year to discuss budgeting and fees. They also invite families and staff to participate in surveys via Survey Monkey that identify options to address budgeting concerns and dollar amounts families are willing to contribute to the program. Based on these results, which are shared with stakeholders, budgets and fees are implemented. Additionally, this program recommends "being at the table" with district financial departments to discuss funding issues for the program. They highlight that it is important to be present at board meetings, extended cabinet meetings, and fiscal meetings about the state of the program and potential changes based on fiscal needs. Board members and district administration are also invited to program events so they can see firsthand the quality of the program.

YMCA
SILICON VALLEY

YMCA Silicon Valley — Providing a Full Picture for Districts

Each year this program shares with districts their total operating expenses in the regular course of their grant accounting. It is important to share a full picture of the operating expenses, including direct and indirect administration, so the district understands how much the program is subsidizing programmatic costs each year. They have critical conversations around high-quality programming and capacity at all levels of the district, including Educational Services, Finance (directly with the Chief Financial Officer), Superintendent, and Board. They hold these conversations well in advance of approaching the need for fees.

ADMINISTRATIVE TASKS

Implementing family fees requires an upfront investment due to the necessary planning and awareness-building, as well as the need for increased administrative processes, staffing, and infrastructure. Programs cited several examples of the greatest costs of implementing family fees, including:

- Time needed for program director/administrators to create systems and ensure accuracy
- Upfront administrative or software costs
- Time needed for initial and ongoing staff training and/or paperwork collection (this can be significant, depending on the number of hours a site coordinator works)
- Bookkeeper or a part-time accountant

PARENT INCOME VERIFICATION

Programs take different approaches to verifying parent income in order to determine the appropriate fee amount. Some programs interviewed simply use the honor system—if a parent says they can't pay due to their income, the program accepts that at face value and makes the necessary adjustments. Other programs require families to sign an agreement stating their inability to pay based on family income. Multiple providers require pay stubs, or other forms of income verification, in order to have their fees waved. This is a decision made at the director level (either by the district, program provider, or in collaboration with the district and their partner). Key considerations were the level of paperwork and administration needed, as well as ensuring equity across parents' level of payment and ability to pay. For example, the honor system is the simplest approach, taking the least amount of infrastructure to maintain. In some cases, the income verification process changed over time as programs developed their infrastructure, and/or as fees became a norm for the community.

COLLECTION PROCESS

The paperwork collection process should be created in an intentional manner, understanding that it is directly tied to parent buy-in, while also being aware of program staff capacity. PCY's research showed that almost 50% of programs interviewed collect family fees at the site level, while 25% have the director or an administrator collect the fees. A few programs flagged the importance of considering the role of program staff with families and ensuring that the collection of money does not interfere with building trust and relationships. Because of this, some programs intentionally did not collect money at the site level. For programs that invested upfront in infrastructure, technology offered a significant opportunity to reduce costs and increase collection effectiveness over the long run. All programs either already had, or invested in, accounting support to some degree. The collection process is typically ongoing either due to the recurring nature of the fees established or the fact that many parents may pay in installments.

YMCA
SILICON VALLEY

YMCA Silicon Valley — Keeping Finances and Relationships Separate

This program uses a central office for all invoicing and fee collection. Once site directors determine the sliding scale for fees, their Member Service Division handles all financial interactions from that point forward, allowing site directors to focus on program activities and their relationships with parents and the school. If a family indicates they are unable to pay for any given month, the program asks if they can pay something and allows them to pay what they can. If they cannot pay at all, then the program writes it off for the month. Site directors have the ability to make these arrangements as well. While it is preferred that parents send their fees directly to the central office, the program does allow families to pay at the site under strict controls (i.e. families must inform the program that they are paying at the site and the Member Services Team monitors those payments each month). This program advises collecting fees ahead of the month of service to save time on administration. They collect fees on the 20th of the month prior to service (ex: collect the first monthly payment by August 20 for September).

BUTTE
COUNTY

Butte County Office of Education — Payment Methods

This program recommends taking time to think through the pros and cons of different payment options. Below are some considerations for each payment method:

- Personal Checks: Accepting personal checks brings with it the issue of bank fees for insufficient funds, resulting in further fee collections.
- Electronic Payment Systems: Using a payment system, such as Square or Paypal could incur percentage fees that eat into your profit margin.
- Cashier's Checks: While cashier's checks ensure that funds are available, they can be an inconvenience to your parents and guardians.
- Cash: Accepting cash at site poses a safety issue for staff and could result in theft.

Regardless of the payment options your program decides to use, ensure that ALL funds are directly deposited into a local education agency (LEA) account. Sites should never keep cash and checks on site. It is vitally important to keep "clean" records for audit purposes.

MONROVIA
USD

Monrovia Unified School District — Fee Collection

This program cited two best practices:

1. Give a receipt to each family as they pay their fees (do not take money and promise a receipt later).
2. Have a designated day for collections. This cuts down on the constant flow of families wanting to make payments. An electronic system can also help with this.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

It's not a Scientific Process: Similar to program development or learning, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to implementing family fees. Every program and community's fiscal situation is unique and there are a variety of priorities and considerations to balance. As outlined, there is a broad range of examples across California in the types of fees and methods of implementation programs can use to best meet the needs of their community and program. Aim to keep the process as simple as possible from the start, and remember that you can build participation and scale over time.

District and Family Buy-in is Key: Communication and transparency are essential when a program is implementing changes. Implementing fees will be a shift for parents and for schools, but as dozens of programs have shown, with upfront clarity on finances and a thoughtful plan of action, buy-in can be developed to get to the shared goal of program quality and sustainability.

Opportunities for Family Engagement: Families want to be involved in their children's educational experiences, and want them to have access to safe and quality learning experiences staffed by caring adults. By including parents in the discussion about funding challenges and program benefits, many parents feel more connected to and can become more involved in the program. For some, the discussion on fees—in conjunction with program impact, quality, and funding—has built a stronger foundation of family engagement that supports the program across the board.

Upfront Investment Needed: Implementing family fees should not be a funding strategy taken on hastily. All programs advise that there are upfront costs and planning time needed to implement even a simple family fee process. It could take a year or two to see the return on your investment and there are limits to the revenue that will be generated from this strategy. It is best to start by conservatively forecasting the financial goals of implementing family fees to supplement the cost of operating high-quality programs.

Diversify Funding to Achieve Sustainability: Family fees present a healthy opportunity to expand funding sources in a sustainable manner. Additionally, a strong implementation could better position programs with other funders due to the high parent buy-in and accountability that comes with fees. Funders regard programs with a sustainability plan and family engagement as a plus when reviewing proposals.

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