



Reimagining School Board Leadership: Actions for Equity

Supplemental Guide



Starting the Conversation





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A publication by NSBA's DIRE (Dismantling Institutional Racism in Education) Initiative
and the Center for Safe Schools

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Policies, programs, and curriculum must be audited for equity. School boards must understand that with equity, there is no such thing as neutral policies. They are either exacerbating, perpetuating, mitigating, or eliminating inequities.



Purpose of Supplemental Guide

Last year, school leaders were faced with unprecedented challenges as they grappled with school closures, the shift to online and hybrid models of instruction, and supporting their communities with an increased awareness of the need for social justice reform. The COVID-19 pandemic and killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and others shined the light on inequities that have existed in our public education system for far too long.

In response to these challenges, NSBA issued its guide entitled, *Reimagining School Board Leadership: Actions for Equity*. This resource was a collaboration between NSBA's Dismantling Institutional Racism in Education (DIRE) initiative and Center for Safe Schools and focused on acknowledging and understanding current events and the historical issues of systemic racism in America. This resource established a call for school boards to rise to the current challenges our school systems are facing to transform public education, with a focus on equitable access to world-class education for every student.

This *Questions for Boards to Ask Supplemental Guide* provides additional resources on how school boards can engage in conversations to drive this work forward.

THE ROLE OF THE BOARD AND A CALL TO IMPROVE AND ENHANCE SUPPORT

As many school districts engage in the process of responding to the pandemic and addressing issues of social injustice, questions arise about how this will be accomplished and what it will look like. While the superintendent will typically keep the board informed, the myriad details to address these issues will be made by the administration. What, then, is the board's role in reopening schools and addressing institutional racism?

School boards set visions and policy. Under today's rules of governance and best practices, the school board must take seriously its role to create a district culture that strives for excellence, acknowledges and addresses inequities, views mistakes as learning opportunities, and sees its work as one of constant improvement—looking ahead rather than behind. This is the time to partner with the professional educators to do everything we can to safeguard student learning. Every question should be asked in the tone and spirit of fiduciaries who are deeply committed to the mission, with a fail-forward mentality where information is data from which to learn, and questions are asked with a growth mindset.

School boards are empowered to be the guiding force for a district. They are uniquely positioned to drive change, and the need for that change has never been more apparent than now. Not just based on the obvious things that will change in terms of how they govern themselves but in a push for change found in the opportunity presented to do better. To meet the needs of every student, create safer learning environments, and act against institutional racism and inequities plaguing our country, boards must ask the right questions and then listen to what their stakeholders have to say. Boards must not wait to be told what their communities need but instead strive to find those answers and drive action themselves.

This supplemental guide offers questions boards should be asking right now. Boards must commit to setting a progressive vision and shared goals for the district with an emphasis on accountability. With that in mind, top priorities for boards should be:

- **Promoting Equity**
- **Elevating the Culture of Your District**
- **Effective Communications**
- **Teaching and Learning**
- **Facilities, Technology, and Budgeting**

PROMOTING EQUITY

The promise of public education is to help every child succeed in school and life. To realize this promise, students must be given resources, support, and interventions based on their specific needs. The nation's school boards are uniquely positioned to fulfill this promise to all students, which is why NSBA is committed to educational equity for all children in public schools.

Know your data and root causes

Traditionally, the board looks at data to understand its district and inform decisions. Metrics typically used include achievement, proficiency, chronic absenteeism, and discipline. But, how confident can you be that those metrics address the conditions that created those outcomes? It is not enough to be familiar with these statistics. It's also important to understand what they mean and what story they tell. In analyzing data, it is essential to look at it in disaggregated ways. Boards also must examine race, gender, socioeconomic status, level of ability, geography, and immigration status, as well as other relevant factors that can have a material effect on outcomes.

For example, research conducted during the pandemic shows that children living in lower socioeconomic (SES) households have greater learning loss (as much as 18% more) than their middle- and upper-income classmates. Children of color also are showing greater negative impact than white students. School boards must create specific plans for identifying the loss and supporting our students of color and lower SES households.

Questions for board members to ask:

- What is your data review process?
- Do you have a districtwide data dashboard? If yes, is it giving you the necessary information? If no, what steps do you need to take?
- What disaggregated information are you examining?
- What data are you using to conduct root cause analysis?
- Is your data helping you to identify root causes?
- Is it clear how data drives policy?

Identify institutional racism

Institutional racism refers to the policies and practices within and across an institution that, intentionally or not, produce outcomes that chronically favor or place racial groups at a disadvantage. Policies, programs, and curriculum must be audited for equity. School boards must understand that with equity, there is no such thing as neutral policies. They are either exacerbating, perpetuating, mitigating, or eliminating inequities. School boards should review hiring practices, curriculum, discipline procedures and policies, honor roll recognition, advanced and honors academic programs, extracurricular programs, and special education for disproportionality. If boards do not take the time to consider equity now, students in low SES households and students of color may never recover from this time in quarantine.

Questions for board members to ask:

- What is the racial profile of your students in extracurricular programs?
- What is the economic and racial profile of students who have been suspended and suspended multiple times?
- How many students of color or from low SES households are in honors and advanced placement courses?
- Are you teaching the truth about American history from multiple perspectives? (slavery, white supremacy, Native American genocide, etc.)?
- Is your curriculum culturally relevant? Does it reinforce institutional racism?
- Can you identify what specific policies you are doing related to inequities that exist (exacerbating, perpetuating, mitigating, or eliminating inequities)?

Training for faculty, administrators, and school boards

All school district employees must receive regular and ongoing professional development regarding issues of race and racism, such as implicit bias, explicit bias, racism and anti-racism. School boards must do the same for their own teams and take a leadership role in developing safe and brave spaces for district staff to learn and grow.

Questions for board members to ask:

- Do your teachers and administrators understand implicit and explicit bias? Do they understand additional concepts related to race and racism?
- Does the board understand implicit and explicit bias? Do they understand additional concepts related to race and racism?
- What training have they had on this topic? How often is training conducted?
- Do your administrators have the training they need to lead for culture change?
- Who are our experts in this work? If we do not have any, who can we collaborate with?
- How are we communicating the purpose and importance of these trainings to staff and community members?

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Including your community

Consider the religious, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic profile of your community. Boards need to be sure they have, or create, home/school connections with major stakeholder groups. They must share data and create opportunities for all members of the community to speak and be heard. Embracing the community is the greatest tool in determining how best to meet its needs.

Questions for board members to ask:

- Is your board reflective of the community? If not, what are you doing to gather community voice and gain insights?
- When and where are board meetings held? Does this impact who attends?
- Do you know the SES and ethnic makeup of your student body?
- Do you have adequate representation of the major groups in your parent organizations? On your board?
- If you recognize that your staff and/or board is predominantly white, have you considered creating a parents of color advisory committee?
- How are we communicating the purpose and goals of equity work with staff and community members?
- How are we preparing to respond to potential resistance in engaging in equity work?

SUPPORTING THE CULTURE OF YOUR DISTRICT

Creating and maintaining a safe and positive culture is at the forefront of school board responsibilities. Establishing and embodying the shared values, beliefs, and traditions of a district are essential to building a sense of community and safety in our schools. The pandemic has made evident the importance of public schools in the economic and cultural health of the community. Although culture has always been important to achieving the collective vision and mission of school districts, the continuing impact of systemic racism on health, economic, psychological, and educational disparities amplifies the urgency to address cultural issues decisively.

Embrace your role of taking care of your community

As community leaders, all public officials are entrusted to care for the stakeholders of their community. After being chosen and elected by neighbors, taxpayers, and citizens, the good of the organization and how it contributes to community culture should be at the forefront of every elected official's thoughts. This means setting a tone of mutual respect, active engagement, and responsiveness to the cultural diversity within your district. We must recognize the pain and struggles felt within our communities, and own our roles, systemically or individually, that may be contributing to this. Effective governing means setting the direction and creating a culture for your district. Creating a positive culture by adopting belief and vision statements reflective of your constituencies and carrying them out can have a cascading effect in a community.

Questions for board members to ask:

- Does your board have equitable and inclusive vision and belief statements in place for the district?
- How are community voices and feelings reflected in your vision statement?
- If community input is lacking, what time can you put on the calendar to discuss and create a vision statement?
- To what extent are you including every voice within your community to develop or revise your vision or belief statements?
- Are your actions, communications, and decisions reflecting those statements?
- What is the district process for goal setting? Do your school and district goals support the boards' goals and the district vision?

Meet the basic needs of the community first

Focus on meeting the basic needs of your community and school first before attempting to address more granular issues. If students do not feel safe or don't have access to basic supplies, they won't be able to function. In addition to meeting direct needs such as food programs, school districts also can be essential resources to help share critical information. Schools have an enormous reach into the community and should partner with local organizations when possible to use their communication programs and resources to help people feel informed, which can help them feel safe.

Questions for board members to ask:

- How are you assessing the needs of the community? Are these methods giving you information reflective of the full community?
- What are the key concerns in your community? How are you currently addressing these concerns? In what ways are you falling short of meeting them?
- How are other communities meeting these needs? What can you learn from what other communities are doing?
- What resources do you have to help meet these needs? What resources are you missing, and how can you mitigate this impact?
- What other community partners can you utilize?
- How are you evaluating success in meeting the needs of the community?



Model respect and pride

Bringing calm and reassurance to a community is an important function for any elected community board. No one should be above doing any job that is needed. Creating a culture of respect and pride requires work every day so that when a crisis hits, it is second nature to continue that commitment.

Questions for board members to ask:

- What can you do to support district efforts to reach out and address the concerns of varied community members?
- How can you best model the leadership that your community expects from us? What values do you need to publicly embody and how can you best express those values?
- What concrete actions can board members take to examine their own biases and shortcomings that might impede your ability to understand and respond to the concerns of community members?
- How can you do more in our governance responsibilities?
- Are you visible? Are you unified in your message?

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

People want to hear from their leaders. They want to know someone is in charge. You should look for every opportunity to employ transparency and timeliness, which will lay the foundation for engaging in challenging conversations. Tell people what is known right now, what is still unknown, and what is being figured out. By engaging in an extraordinary level of transparency, even when the district does not have all the answers or when a mistake is made, you will build trust.

Stakeholders want to hear from you

Communication is critical. Consistent communication is key to maintaining public trust. Even if the communication is, “We don’t have all the details, but are monitoring the situation,” stakeholders want to know that they can trust you to stay on top of things and respond as needed. They need confidence and calm. Updated and regular communication helps them see that the school board and district office will be the place they turn to for information they can trust.

Questions for board members to ask:

- Do you have a clear communications plan and a centralized messaging and communication center? Are you adequately publicizing it?
- Do your communications meet the needs of all community members (for example is it accessible in multiple languages and mediums)?
- Have board members created and shared talking points so that the message from the district is consistent?
- Is your messaging consistent throughout your board and district? Are teachers, assistants, front office staff, and school board members all saying the same thing?
- What varied media outlets and communication venues have you employed in your communications? How have you ensured varied stakeholders can get access to your messaging?
- When it comes to messaging, is your school’s attorney in the loop?
- How are you responding to questions and feedback to ensure that all stakeholders feel heard?

Know your stakeholders and their concerns

Be aware of how you are addressing stakeholder input and concerns in your communications. Key elements of effective communication include:

- **Honesty** — Be forthright about what has worked and what hasn’t. Explain what you’re doing, what you’re not doing, and the process going forward.
- **Attitude** — Exude confidence. Not with arrogance, but in recognition that operating a successful school district that serves every student’s needs is a highly complicated endeavor, and you are experienced in doing that.
- **Decision-making** — Don’t promise perfection. Correct evident errors or oversights promptly.
- **Empathy** — Show compassion and understanding. When challenges or crises arise, acknowledge the stress and mental anguish affecting everyone. There is probably nothing more important to communicate right now than a sense of concern and humanity.

Questions for board members to ask:

- How are you gathering stakeholder feedback? How are you ensuring all relevant community members are included?
- Is your communications team trained in cultural responsiveness and cultural fluency?
- Do you have a standardized system of communication based on the type of information being distributed? Is it based on the varied audiences you are communicating with?
- Are you modifying your communications plans based on feedback?
- How often are you communicating with various stakeholders, and are there particular groups that may require additional outreach to address their specific concerns and issues?
- How are you ensuring timely communication with other critical agencies (e.g., state and local health departments)?
- How are you aligning your communications with those of other district- and state-level agencies (district government, state boards, state departments of education, etc.)?

Communications plans change

The state of your communities is continually changing. With that, “situational knowledge” constantly evolves — and your communications plans must evolve with them. They must be reviewed and updated regularly to address emerging issues, new protocols, and new concerns. You will want to adjust the methods you are using to communicate and perhaps add some new ones. You will want to consider what other districts are doing to engage their stakeholders and adopt useful ideas.

Questions for board members to ask:

- When and how are you reviewing your communications plans?
- Are you reaching your intended audience? How do you know? What feedback have you received?
- Do you have the skills to evaluate and modify your communications plan, or is outside support needed?
- How are you assessing the effectiveness of your communications plan?
- Are you reviewing what has been successful for similar districts?

SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE AND INCLUSIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

School boards will need to provide leadership to address the educational gaps that have plagued the education system and widened during the pandemic. This will require the intentional allocation of resources to ensure priority is given to the students most negatively affected, including students of color most profoundly impacted by the pandemic and the resulting school closures. It also will require deliberate efforts to ensure that the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students, teachers, and staff are prioritized and addressed.

School boards will need to provide leadership to address the educational gaps that have plagued the education system and widened during the pandemic.



The challenges facing district and school leaders can appear daunting. There may be a tendency to find ways to approximate as much as possible a semblance of “normal” that existed before the pandemic and this most recent focus on social injustices and plan for a full return to the way things were before. But the present moment should not be thought of as simply a temporary storm to wait out passively. It presents an opportunity to critically rethink the structures and systems of schooling that have perpetuated the inequalities and systemic racism that led to such daunting challenges in the first place.

Support culturally responsive mental health, social, and emotional challenges

The pandemic has exposed on a much larger scale the systemic racism perpetuating inequities in our schools and communities. School leaders must acknowledge and address the deleterious impacts on educational opportunity. They must repair and strengthen staff and student relationships while mitigating the social and emotional consequences of social unrest and the pandemic. Some of these issues include trauma, mental health concerns, lack of trust, and unreported abuse.

Staff has experienced many of the same traumas. Having had to adjust quickly to online learning environments with little advanced training, many teachers may have experienced considerable stress and frustration. They also may have deep anxieties about what to expect in the coming school year with the uncertainty of the social landscape and the potential threat of another wave of infections. In addition, teachers are experiencing high levels of secondary trauma, which comes from prolonged exposure to the trauma of others, such as students and families.

Now is the time to commit to providing intentional resources to strengthen your mental health and social and emotional learning supports and programs.

Questions for board members to ask:

- How are you using this moment as an opportunity to ensure students of color in your district schools are heard, acknowledged, valued, and supported?
- What traumas have your students and/or staff experienced?
- Do you have training on understanding and supporting Adverse Childhood Experiences?
- Are you aware of the cultural backgrounds in your community? Do your mental health supports reflect the needs of those cultures?
- Are your student and family supports not only culturally responsive but also culturally fluent?
- Are there triggers in your facilities, systems, and curriculums that may retraumatize students and/or staff?
- How will you ensure your schools are providing the mental health and social and emotional supports necessary for students who need it the most?
- How are you ensuring that the opportunity and access gaps widened by school closures are prioritized?
- How will schools adapt schedules, staffing, and curriculum to ensure safe and equitable learning environments?
- Do you have adequate mental health supports in your schools? Are these programs adequately funded?
- Are you aware of cultural needs in your community? Have you considered potential stigmas of mental health in various cultures? Have you considered how mental health supports may differ among various cultures?
- Do you have a plan for social and emotional learning implementation?
- How are you planning to continue these supports in the event of potential future school closures?

Understand compassion fatigue

A key item for boards to be aware of is compassion fatigue, which is defined as physical and mental exhaustion, as well as emotional withdrawal, experienced by those who care for others undergoing arduous circumstances. These circumstances can certainly apply to educators, as they not only serve as care providers for their families, they also are actively caring for their students, colleagues, and the greater communities in which they live. Compassion fatigue is associated with feelings of hopelessness and difficulties in dealing with work or performing a job effectively. These negative feelings usually have a gradual onset and can reflect educators' feelings that their efforts make no difference.

Another component of compassion fatigue is secondary traumatic stress. This term refers to work-related, secondary exposure to extremely, or traumatically, stressful events.

It is important to remind yourself that you are not alone. We are all managing the unknown, but we will get through this together. Sharing our experiences with others helps us convey how we feel and allows us to maintain community through physical distance. By making resilience a priority, you can contribute to a culture that helps everyone stay strong through tough times.

Questions for board members to ask:

- What steps are you taking to get an accurate pulse of the community and members of the district team?
- How are you encouraging colleagues and students to incorporate mindfulness into their routines?
- What actions are you taking to promote self-care in the district?
- What opportunities for colleague professional development and self-reflection have you built into employee learning and performance processes?
- What activities, events, or structures have you put into place to encourage strong peer networks? Do you have a virtual plan as well?
- Do you have formalized colleague resource groups or affinity organizations structured into the district's employee wellness programming?

Culturally relevant and sustaining curriculum

Through the growing social unrest being seen in our communities, it is becoming even more clear that our most marginalized groups do not feel seen or heard. This condition is no different in traditional education where curriculums and teaching methods have historically highlighted the white experience as the one and only truth. Through this lens, students are put in a position to feel the need to conform and abandon their cultures to acclimate and succeed. Schools' willingness to adapt to culturally relevant and sustaining curriculums is essential in addressing inequities and institutional racism in our society.

Questions for board members to ask:

- Do your board members understand and accept their roles as change agents for social justice and educational equity? If not, what training and development may be necessary?
- Do you have a statement related to the purpose and desired outcome for teaching a culturally relevant curriculum?
- Do you see cultural differences as an asset?
- How will you determine which teachers are prepared to teach this curriculum effectively? What additional training will they receive?
- How is the student diversity of the community reflected in the selected culturally relevant curriculum?
- Who or what community members will be an integral part of the selection of materials for the culturally relevant curriculum?
- How will this curriculum be presented to the community? How are you prepared to deal with resistance?
- What cultures need to be included to challenge the precepts of both students and staff to broaden their experiences and perspective?
- What strategies and/or techniques will be implemented to support building relationships of trust with students and their families and extend beyond the classroom and school?

Hiring to support every student

Students who see themselves in their teachers tend to be more successful, yet teaching populations continue to be primarily white staff. Diversity within school faculty and staff must encompass persons of diverse races, religions, sexual orientations, life experiences, disabilities, etc., so that they reflect the world around the students they serve. It also affords the opportunity to create and build relationships for students who need and/or desire a culturally responsive setting. Boards must be aware of the demographics of their students and how they are represented in their staff. They must also take an honest look at hiring practices and how they may or may not be impacting the district's ability to bring in and retain effective teachers of diverse backgrounds.

Questions for board members to ask:

- What is your goal in creating a more diverse school community?
- How have past hiring practices impacted the current makeup of your staff?
- What are you incorporating into your hiring practices to ensure that faculty and staff members represent your larger community?
- Historically speaking, what do your past hiring practices indicate about your desire to have a diverse faculty/staff? What preconceived ideas were at play? What steps need to be taken to identify specific transitional goals to move you through those biases to arrive at a culturally sensitive process for hiring?
- If you have had trouble in hiring a diverse staff, what measures can increase diverse educators, and/or staff to our district (i.e., recruiting at HBCU colleges/universities; economic incentives to teach in your district; recruiting through programs such as AmeriCorps, etc.)?
- What about your district is inviting to a diverse pool of applicants? What can you do to make it more attractive to potential hires?
- How can you work to increase interaction and exposure of students and staff to diverse cultures in addition to just having a more diverse faculty/staff?

FACILITIES, TECHNOLOGY, AND BUDGETING

The COVID-19 pandemic has added to all-ready existing economic struggles in districts and in states, furthering the inequities that students are facing. New challenges continue to arise in supporting facilities and technology are more clearly defining the inequitable allocation of resources in our schools. Boards are being asked to do more with less. They must be aware of the work that must be done to realign shrinking budgets to address historical inequities along with meeting new needs.

Prioritize resources

Maintaining current schedules of assets, facilities, and maintenance is not only key for activities such as budgeting, but it is also critical to respond effectively to a crisis. The board must know what the district needs. As districts prepare for expected budget cuts, it is important to prioritize maintenance spending. More will be expected in terms of cleaning, disinfecting, and protective equipment for facilities and staff.

Questions for board members to ask:

- How are resources being distributed across the district? Are there inequities that can be identified in how resources are allocated?
- Do you have a maintenance schedule for buildings and facilities? Does it prioritize needs and earmark those that require immediate attention?
- What health and safety protocols are you putting in place to keep both staff and students safe?
- Are you communicating with local, state, and federal officials on recommendations, guidance, and policy?
- Are you making multiple plans if your primary plan needs adjustments?

Assess operational considerations and budget implications

Boards must look at areas such as projected revenue from local, state, and federal sources; the impacts of salaries, such as supplemental contracts or the need to hire additional health staff; employee benefits; purchased services, such as new online platforms, technology infrastructure, and increased custodial costs; and supplies and materials, such as cleaning supplies and additional software.

Questions for board members to ask:

- How are budget implications correcting or reinforcing inequalities?
- How will budgets need to be modified to prepare for increased remote learning?
- What is the status of your “rainy day” fund? How should you prioritize its spending?
- Have you appropriately calculated and budgeted the costs of facilities and technology maintenance?
- How will federal stimulus and infrastructure money help?
- Are you aware of grants for which you may be eligible?

Technology priorities

The immediate shift to remote settings during the pandemic emphasized our reliance on technology and magnified inequities, be they geographic or socioeconomic. Students, families, and staff with limited technology and internet access were at a disadvantage. Now is the time to reevaluate the needs of all our communities and to continue this work when schools fully reopen.

Even as we come back together, it is time to use technology in more meaningful ways. It is tempting to desire to go back to our “old normal” that rarely integrated technology. COVID-19 closures exposed cracks in education from a technological sense. It also brought home the fact that technology is the primary tool to adapt to most circumstances. Everyday technology is a significant part of our world, and district leaders need to make this a priority reflected in their own business as well as their students' education.

Questions for board members to ask:

- How can we utilize technology to streamline our processes and navigate issues?
- What access level do students have to the internet? What can we do to improve that?
- How are we training and improving skill levels for everyone in the district?
- Are we collaborating with key stakeholders to creatively resolve issues?
- How are we addressing the inequity that exists between students based on geographic location or socioeconomic concerns?

Advocate with state and federal officials

The COVID-19 pandemic and the call to address institutional racism have highlighted the gross inequities in our education system. Now is the time to address long-standing systemic issues such as hiring and retaining more teachers of color and creating culturally responsive curriculum and support for that curriculum.

All schoolwork going virtual exposed that 30% of students were without internet access. Many schools compensated with hot spot distribution or accommodated by creating paper packets that were mailed or delivered. But some students simply quit. Similarly, decisions about school closings, school reopening, calendars, and academic accountability have often been dictated at the state or federal level, leaving schools with little flexibility to adapt for their local needs. Board members have a responsibility to advocate for a change in laws to allow for local control and to ensure that the federal agencies that can impact access leverage their power.



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Questions for board members to ask:

- Are there state-level policies that either school boards or state associations should be championing?
- Have you partnered with local broadband providers to devise a plan to ensure students can get access?
- Have you communicated with state and national representatives that schools need equity in access, local control to respond appropriately to a crisis, and prioritizing school funding even in the face of a loss of tax revenue?
- Have you partnered with your state association and NSBA to make your voices stronger in advocacy?



Special thanks to these contributors:





The National School Boards Association (NSBA) is a federation of state associations and the U.S. territory of the Virgin Islands that represent locally elected school board officials serving approximately 51 million public school students regardless of their disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status or citizenship. Working with and through our state association members, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. We believe that public education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people and that each child deserves equitable access to an education that maximizes their individual potential. For more information, visit nsba.org.



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