

Work in Progress: Including Students with Disabilities in School-to-Work Initiatives

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FOCUS ON AUTISM AND OTHER DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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Since the School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) was passed by Congress in 1994, 37 states and a host of localities have received federal grants to build systems that link learning in classrooms with the skills required by the nation's youth to succeed in the workplace. School-to-work (STW) partnerships are forming in communities throughout the country, and thousands of schools, educators, employers, labor unions, community organizations, parent groups, and other stakeholders are participating in these partnerships. The purpose of this article is to provide a synopsis of the STWOA; describe what states and localities are doing to include youth with disabilities in STW initiatives; and offer recommendations to special educators, rehabilitation professionals, students with disabilities, and parents for increasing the participation of youth with disabilities in a wide range of STW activities.

In May of 1994, after strong bipartisan support in Congress, President Bill Clinton signed into law the School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA). The aim of the legislation was to improve the preparation of young people for their careers by providing a national framework for building local systems to help ensure that all students achieve high levels of academic and technical skills (U.S. Departments of Education and Labor, 1996a). The assumption was that the development of local school-to-work (STW) systems would better prepare all students for entry into the workforce, regardless of whether their pathway to work involved postsecondary education or immediate entry into the workforce. Such systems would aid all students in deciding what type of careers they might like to have by providing them with educational and work activities that would provide exposure to and experience in a wide range of careers. This knowledge would assist them in making successful transitions from school to postschool educational and employment environments.

The STWOA provides seed money, or "venture capital," in legislative terms, to states and localities for the development of school-to-work systems that promote the linking of classroom instruction and work-based learning. Through the school-to-work initiatives, the nation's youth, including those with disabilities, receive rigorous instruction that is relevant to the rapidly changing demands of the work world.

Only about 50%, or roughly 1.4 million, of our nation's youth enroll in some form of postsecondary education soon after they graduate. Of these, only about one half successfully complete a baccalaureate program (Grant Foundation Commission, 1988; Kazis, 1993). Fewer than 1 in 10 large American firms hire new high school graduates. It is no wonder that about one third of young adults fail to find stable employment by the time they reach the age of 30 (Osterman, 1993). The evidence supports the idea that our nation's schools do a much better job of preparing students for furthering their education and training in postsecondary educational environments than in preparing students for careers. The STWOA is perhaps the most comprehensive federal initiative to date designed to significantly enhance students' postschool outcomes, regardless of whether a student

has a disability, or whether a student seeks immediate entry into the labor force or postsecondary education. The STWOA is a major educational reform initiative that builds on and expands earlier school programs and school-business collaborations, with origins in special and vocational education, in an effort to develop and implement comprehensive STW systems that benefit all students.

The Act's emphasis on serving all students in STW systems is perhaps one of the most significant aspects of this unique piece of legislation in terms of contributing to improved postschool employment outcomes for youth with disabilities. However, preliminary findings report that youth with disabilities are generally underrepresented in STW initiatives (Hershey, Hudis, Silverberg, & Haimson, 1997; Miller, Hazelkorn, & Lombard, 1997; Silverberg, 1997). One possible explanation is that special education has its own system to facilitate transition from school to postschool environments, including competitive employment. Thus, some professionals may feel that students with disabilities do not need to be included in STW initiatives. Misinformed skepticism pertaining to the inclusion of youth with disabilities in STW initiatives by key participants in the development and implementation of school-to-work activities may also contribute to the lack of involvement of students with disabilities in those activities. Perhaps one of the most alarming explanations is that the special educators, rehabilitation professionals, and individuals "with disabilities are unaware of the potential value of the STW movement in improving the postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities.

In order for individuals to realize the act's full potential, it is imperative that special educators, rehabilitation professionals, youth with disabilities, and their parents be knowledgeable about the STWOA, and be active participants in the design and implementation of school-to-work systems in their state and local communities. The purpose of this article is to provide a synopsis of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, provide examples of what states and/or localities are doing to include students with disabilities in school-to-work initiatives, and offer recommendations that will lead to increased participation of youth with disabilities in school-to-work activities under the act.

What Is the School-to-Work Opportunities Act?

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act seeks to link what students learn in the classroom with the skills required to succeed in the workforce. The S'IW approach to learning is based on the concept that education for all should be made more relevant and useful to future careers and lifelong learning (U.S. Departments of Education and Labor, 1996b). Parents, students, secondary and postsecondary educators, employers, labor representatives, locally elected officials, and others form partnerships that drive the development and implementation of school-to-work initiatives at the local level. Through school-to-work initiatives all students, including those with disabilities, students who are college bound, and students desiring to enter the workforce upon exiting school, will be afforded opportunities to participate in a range of activities that help them set and achieve their career goals. Young adults exiting secondary education programs will be better prepared to realize their vocational aspirations through the development of state and local partnerships that successfully (a) emphasize learning in real work environments; (b) relate classroom education to these real-life work experiences; (c) link educational activities with related programs and services; and (d) connect students and their families to necessary community resources and supports.

School and community partnerships play an integral role in the successful implementation of school-

to-work activities. Employers and representatives from business and industry have increasingly voiced the concern that young adults are exiting high school without the skills required to succeed in a rapidly changing workforce. Through the development of effective school and community partnerships, students will be afforded the opportunity to participate in work-based learning experiences that reinforce what they are learning in school. Students may be more motivated to learn when they see the relevance of what they are learning in the classroom to success in the workforce. Furthermore, because S'IW partnerships establish linkages between secondary education and postsecondary educational and training programs, community organizations, and employers, students who participate are more likely to experience success in making the transition from school to employment or further education and training.

Students participating in school-to-work activities will encounter significant changes in both the method and the environments in which their education is rendered. For example, they might be involved in a career-focused program of study where students choose a "career major" by 11th grade. A career-focused program of study is designed to meet a particular state's academic standards, including those established under Goals 2000, and typically requires transitions to postsecondary education and the achievement of a nationally recognized skill certificate in the chosen career major. Students in other localities might participate in a series of systematically planned work experiences and training that are coordinated with school-based learning and provide students with instruction in general workplace competencies as well as workplace mentors.

As the number of states receiving federal funding to support the development and implementation of school-to-work initiatives increases, the variety of activities undertaken in local communities will become as diverse as the economic, political, and social environments in which the STW systems operate.

Elements of the School-to-Work System

The STWOA was designed to give states and local partnerships considerable flexibility in developing and implementing their own unique school-to-work systems. However, the act specifies that all school-to-work programs must include three components: school-based activities, work-based activities, and connecting activities. The act further specifies guidelines for each of these components (see Table 1). These components promote the development of school-to-work systems that focus on high-quality academic and career preparation, learning by doing, and bridging the gap between what is learned in school and what is required in the workplace.

The manner in which each of the components (i.e., school-based, work-based, and connecting activities) is implemented at the local level exemplifies many innovative strategies. For example, in a midwestern elementary school, all students participate in the school's Career Immersion Program (Institute on Community Integration, 1997), which offers hands-on school-based learning whereby students participate in classroom businesses and in-school, nonpaid employment, with both activities guided by business and community partners. The classroom businesses, such as a school supply business and a popcorn and candy business, operate independently; students are responsible for making management and marketing decisions, and teachers serve as chief executive officers. Students can also apply for in-school employment. They are expected to submit employment applications, participate in the interview process, and complete the nonpaid work experience under

contract.

Work-based learning components recognize the importance of instruction and skills training that occur in community-based businesses and organizations, specifically workplace experiences, structured job training, and mentoring. For example, in an elementary school in the Southeast, students between the ages of 9 and 13, including students with mental retardation, participate in work-based learning activities through job-shadowing experiences (Institute on Community Integration, 1995). Local businesses permit students to follow, or "shadow," an employee at the business to learn about the particular job or industry. Job shadowing provides students with opportunities to explore various occupations and careers at an early age, as well as to develop work skills through activities and instruction provided at the business.

Connecting activities include strategies to connect school-based and work-based learning, and developing linkages between secondary education and postsecondary education, employers, and community agencies and organizations (e.g., the Department of Rehabilitative Services). For example, the school system assists students with making the transition to employment, accessing postsecondary education options and supports, and contacting community and adult service providers (Institute on Community Integration, 1996).

What Type of Federal Support Is Available?

One of the unique aspects of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act is that it did not establish another education and training program with federal mandates that address the needs of a targeted population. Instead, the STWOA sought to develop comprehensive statewide and local systems for facilitating school-to-work transitions. STWOA directs seed money to interested statewide collaborations among governors, state agency representatives, labor representatives, and business representatives. At the local level, the activities are to be undertaken by partnerships among educators, employers, employees, and students (Hershey et al., 1997). The types of grants that are awarded through funds allocated under the STWOA are described in Table 2.

TABLE 1
Components of School-to-Work Systems

School-Based Learning Component

- Career awareness, exploration, and counseling programs beginning at the earliest possible age, but no later than seventh grade;

- Career major selection no later than the beginning of the 11th grade;
- A program of study that meets the academic standards the state has established for all students, including, where applicable, standards established under the Goals 2000: The Educate America Act, and meets the requirements for postsecondary education preparation and skill certificate award;
- A program of instruction and curriculum that integrates academic and vocational learning and incorporates instruction to the extent practicable, in all aspects of an industry;
- Regular evaluations of students and dropouts to identify strengths and weaknesses, workplace knowledge, goals, and need for additional learning opportunities; and
- Procedures that ease student entry into additional training or postsecondary education programs and that ease the transfer of students between education and training programs.

Work-Based Learning Components

- Work experience opportunities;
- Job training and work experiences that are coordinated with learning in school-based programs that are relevant to students' career major choices and lead to skill certificates;
- Workplace mentoring;
- Instruction and activities in general workplace competencies, including positive work attitudes, employability, and practicable skills; and
- Broad instruction, to the extent practicable, in all aspects of the industry.

Connecting Activities

- Matching of students with employers' work-based learning opportunities;
- School-site mentors who act as liaisons among school, employer, and community partners;
- Technical assistance to small- and medium-sized firms and other parties;
- Assistance to schools and employers in integrating school-based and work-based learning;
- Active participation of employers in cooperation with local education officials;

- Assistance to participants in finding jobs, continuing their education, or entering additional training, and linking them with other community services to assure a successful transition;
 - Collection and analysis of participants' postprogram outcomes; and
 - Linkage of youth development activities in this act with other employer and industry strategies for upgrading the skills of incumbent workers.
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Illustrations From Various States

Currently, all 50 states have been awarded development grants, and 37 of those have also been awarded implementation grants. According to a recently released 2-year progress report to the U.S. Congress on the implementation of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, 500,000 students, 135,000 employers, and 1,800 schools throughout the nation are involved in federally funded school-to-work activities (U.S. Departments of Education and Labor, 1996a). States and localities have implemented a variety of activities to address the requirements of each of the three components of the act (school-based learning, work-based learning, and connecting activities; see Table 1). Career academies, cooperative education, tech prep programs, youth apprenticeships, and school-based enterprises are five approaches, among many, employed by local school-to-work partnerships to implement the various elements of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994. For localities that have yet to develop or implement school-to-work programs, each of these approaches provides an example of how the programs might be developed. Descriptions of sample activities being conducted to meet the STW requirements in various states follow.

TABLE 2

STWOA Venture Capital Funding

State Development Grants

State development grants support efforts to plan and develop statewide systems of school-to-work transitions. All 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia have been awarded planning grants. A total of \$32 million has been awarded, with the average grant totaling approximately \$430,000.

State Implementation Grants

State implementation grants are one-time, 5-year venture capital investments intended to help every state and territory establish STW systems. In 1994, eight states were awarded 5-year grants with the understanding that their efforts would, in part, inform and improve subsequent efforts. Nineteen states were added in 1995, and 10 states were awarded implementation grants in 1996.

Native American Program Grants

Native American program grants support the development and implementation of STW systems for Native American youth. Eighteen grants have been awarded thus far, totaling \$1.8 million.

Federal Implementation Grants to Local Partnerships

Federal implementation grants to local partnerships support the development and implementation of school-to-work transition systems by local jurisdictions or communities. Some of the grants went to communities that were prepared to implement a school-to-work program but whose state was not ready for statewide implementation. Other grants have been earmarked to address the specific challenges of both urban and rural communities.

National Program Grants

National program grants support research, evaluation, technical assistance, dissemination, and other efforts. The National STW Learning and Information Center provides technical assistance and facilitates exchanges among the grantees. A contract of \$1.3 million per year for a 5-year evaluation grant was awarded in September of 1995 to Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

School-to-Work Program Models

Career Academies. A career academy is typically a school-within-a-school that offers students academic programs organized around broad career themes (National School-to-Work Office, 1997). Classroom instruction is integrated into work-based learning as academies try to equip students with the skills necessary for both workforce entry and postsecondary admission. Curricula are often planned with the assistance of business partners, who suggest program structure, provide classroom speakers, host school field trips, and provide mentors for individual students. Students may be placed into jobs related to their field of study in the summer, and may spend some part of their senior year participating in a work experience program. One of the essential characteristics of a career academy is that local employers from the relevant industry sector are heavily involved (Mendel, 1994). For example, employers might donate equipment and services, offer employees to serve as mentors, or provide summer jobs and internships.

An example of a career academy is the Academy for Law, Criminal Justice, and Public Administration, based at Horace Furness High School in South Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. That academy offers students concentrated studies in the legal, governance, and criminal justice systems. To help students integrate their academic coursework, classes focus on year-long projects that explore a specific legal issue. For instance, in studying the topic of DNA for trial purposes, students might conduct statistical analyses of its structure for math, analyze its composition for chemistry, and write a research paper on its discovery for English. Periodic guest speakers, mock trials, role-playing sessions, and trips to law firms in the area enhance the classroom instruction (National School-to-Work Office, 1997).

Cooperative Education. In cooperative education, students participate in a coordinated program of school-based learning and career-related work experience during the later years of high school. Students and participating businesses develop training and evaluation plans to guide instruction, and students receive course credit for their learning and work experiences (National School-to-Work Office, 1997). Cooperative education is one of the most extensive sources of work-based learning available to high school students (Mendel, 1994; Stern, Finkelstein, Stone, Latting, & Dornsife, 1994).

Poudre R-1 School District in Fort Collins, Colorado, offers a cooperative education program to students as early as the 10th grade. The program is called Professional and Career Experience (PaCE), and approximately 550 students participate. The goals of the program are to provide high-quality career exploration instruction and increase the number and diversity of cooperative education placements. The school-based components of the program include career exploration and career development courses, work-readiness courses, and seminars on workplace issues. Students typically begin their courses in the 10th grade, at which time they are required to develop a preliminary career plan and job-search portfolio. The work-based components of the program include work internships (paid and unpaid), job shadowing, and community service. Students work in coop placements in a range of fields, including high-tech electronics, health care, and the public sector. To maintain the quality of placements, PaCE program directors and employers prepare training plans describing the skills students are expected to acquire. Finally, students can receive up to 25 high school course credits for placement activities (Pauly, Kopp, & Haimson, 1995).

Tech-Prep Programs. Tech-prep programs provide 4 years of sequential coursework at the secondary and postsecondary levels to prepare students for technical careers. Programs typically begin in 11th grade and culminate in an associate's degree or certificate after 2 years of postsecondary training. Techprep programs are designed to strengthen students' academic skills while providing them with technical preparation in a career area (National School-to-Work Office, 1997).

Wayne Township Tech Prep, in Indianapolis, Indiana, operates a program that serves approximately 89 students. Participating students are provided with a fixed sequence of courses in English, math, science, manufacturing technology, and computer applications. The instruction in the classes is often application based, meaning that lessons are linked to the area of career interest and are more "hands-on" and application focused. Students are also able to participate in a planned co-op during the summer of their senior year in the field they desire. Upon successfully completing high school, the students continue their coursework at the local community college, where they may ultimately earn an associate's degree (Pauly et al., 1995).

Youth Apprenticeship Programs. Students participate in a coordinated program of school-based and work-based learning that provides career counseling, integrated academic and occupational instruction, training and mentoring in a workplace, progressively higher levels of work experience, and the opportunity to earn an industry-recognized skill credential. Most programs extend from high school through at least 1 year of postsecondary education (Mendel, 1994).

Craftsmanship 2000 (C2), in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is a metalworking youth apprenticeship program serving students in the Tulsa School District and 13 surrounding school districts. C2 is a 4-year program that begins in the 11th grade and ultimately leads to an associate's degree from Tulsa Junior College. Students experience in-plant training at the Hilti Corporation every year except the first. The school-based learning components include academic and technical instruction at the school's technology center, academic instruction integrating themes relevant to metalworking, extended school day and year, and linkages with junior college for an associate's degree. The work-based activities apply and extend skills taught in the classroom and help students develop firm-specific skills, acquire industry mentors, and gain both paid and unpaid work experience that increases each year (Craftsmanship 2000, 1997).

School-Based Enterprises. School-based enterprises engage students in school-based activities that produce goods or services for sale to, or use by, people other than the students involved (Stern et al., 1994). The activities include students' building houses, running restaurants, managing retail stores, repairing and selling cars, and staffing childcare centers. School-based enterprises typically provide structured work-based learning while in school, but the school curriculum does not usually build on students' work experience.

The Montgomery County Students Construction Trades Foundation in Montgomery County, Maryland, is an example of school-based enterprise; students who participated built houses and sold them on the open market. The program originally grew out of vocational education and currently involves students in landscaping, architecture, food service, cabinetmaking, journalism, and marketing.

What Are States & Localities Doing to Include Youth with Disabilities in School-to-Work Activities?

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act was designed to benefit all students. However, unlike the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, participation by students with disabilities in STW activities is not an entitlement. In states and localities building STW systems, students with disabilities should be afforded ample opportunity to participate, as well as receive necessary support to successfully complete STW programs. In fact, all states are required to have plans for including all students, including those with disabilities, in STW systems. In addition, state and local governance structures are required to include their representation.

To ensure that students with disabilities are included in School-to-Work initiatives, states and localities have undertaken a number of activities. In Maryland, for example, there is close collaboration between the state's school-to-work initiative, called Career Connections, and the Office

of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) transition systems change project, called the Maryland Transition Initiative. Specifically, they

- require their respective subgrantees to demonstrate active joint participation;
- sponsor joint conferences and inservice events; and
- provide joint technical assistance to local school districts.

Additionally, in each local partnership, disability advocates serve on the established governance structure, where the expectation is full participation in each subcommittee, as opposed to convening a separate "special education" committee. Maryland is deliberately seeking to avoid duplicate efforts and minimize categorical approaches to transition. For example, in an STW initiative in Baltimore County, students with and without disabilities are engaged in a comprehensive work-based learning project. In a newly established project in Baltimore city, two vocational high schools, operated much like career academics, are actively including students with disabilities in work based learning experiences in all of their occupational offerings.

In Oregon, 1 of its 15 regional offices has a particular concern that it develop STW systems that include all students, as opposed to individual categorical transition programs. For example, in many schools the work-study coordinator organizes work-based learning for all students, including those with disabilities. Transition plans are developed for all students that are no different from those required for students with disabilities. Furthermore, each school develops plans for school-to-work activities with the expectation that activities will include all students. In many of the rural areas, whether it is a challenge to organize work-based learning due to the paucity of nearby businesses, schools are given assistance to establish school-based enterprises but must first demonstrate how students with disabilities will participate.

Colorado's School-to-Career initiative has embraced a comprehensive approach to integrating all students into school-to-work systems statewide. Similar to Maryland's system, rather than having special populations represented in separate groups, Colorado includes representatives from diverse populations and related professionals on all working committees at every level. Thus, all populations are represented across the board, from the design stage to implementation. Whenever local school-to-work grants are available, local partnerships are required to include the transition interagency governing boards for youth with disabilities as working partners. As the 5 year transition systems change grant for Colorado was ending, it reframed its initiative for youth with disabilities to be aligned with the comprehensive school-to-work initiative, thus ensuring that the state would continue to integrate best practices for youth with disabilities – and key personnel-within the larger system.

Implications of the STWOA for Special Educators, Rehabilitation Professionals, Parents, and Youth with Disabilities

Given the obvious parallels between the intent of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act and proven practices of the most effective STW transition initiatives for youth with disabilities, there is now a window of opportunity to use STW partnerships as vehicles for improving the postschool outcomes

for youth with disabilities. Examples provided demonstrate initial efforts to include students with disabilities in STW initiatives; however, much more remains to be done to ensure that integrated school-to-work systems are developed and implemented. The following is a list of activities that special educators, rehabilitation professionals, and parent so young adults with disabilities might consider so that more integration of effort occurs between general and special education transition initiatives.

Establish links between Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) transition initiatives and STW systems. Since 1991 the OSEP of the U.S. Department of Education has funded grants in almost every state to improve systems for school-to-work transition for youth with disabilities. These initiatives parallel many of those now under way for all students through the STWOA. When these parallel systems merge efforts, as in the Maryland and Colorado examples, mutual activity strengthens the objectives of both.

Seek representation on STW planning/governance teams. School-to-work governance teams exist everywhere STW partnerships are being formed. Because the School-to-Work Opportunities Act requires participation by youth with disabilities in STW initiatives, governance team membership by disability advocates is one obvious way for partnerships to demonstrate this intent. Once on the team, participate in all aspects of the partnership. Advocacy is more effective when seen in the light of the larger mission.

Begin to unify employer engagement. The backbone of STW initiatives is strong employer involvement. One recent evaluation of STW suggested that 10 times the number of employers now involved will be necessary to create systems where classroom and work-based learning are truly linked (Hershey et al., 1997). Competition for employer involvement for categorical programs is aggravating to employers. Work together to get their attention.

Share what works. For example, the concept of contextual learning, that is learning tasks in real-life situations, has been a hallmark of successful school-to-work transition programs for youth with significant disabilities. This success with youth with disabilities can inform the larger STW movement and thereby garner greater credibility and participation in STW systems.

Look for links to a variety of postsecondary options. Formal postschool links to specific disability services (e.g., vocational rehabilitation, supported employment, etc.) are important options but not necessarily exclusive ones. STW programs are developing all kinds of promising links to community colleges, employment support services, and a host of generically available community services and programs. Individuals exploring post-school options with transition-age youth with disabilities should be familiar with the many possibilities that can result in valuable postschool support, which in turn augment and enhance those services traditionally available to people with disabilities.

Implications for Individuals with Disabilities and Their Families

It is essential that transition-age youth with disabilities and their parents find out what types of school-to-work activities are being developed and implemented in their communities. Knowledge of the types of activities schools offer under the school-based learning component, the work-based learning

component, and connecting activities help in identifying activities that will assist the student in reaching his or her career goals. Students with disabilities and their parents can more effectively advocate for participation in STW activities during the development of the students' transition plans if they are aware of STW activities available through the school system.

Students with disabilities and their parents should also pay close attention to the local school system's effort to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education programs. The same strategies and support that are provided to students with disabilities in general education programs should be provided to students desiring to participate in school-to-work activities.

For well over a decade, the transition of youth with disabilities from school to adult life has been a major priority for public - policy-makers, educators, rehabilitation professionals, and parents of young adults with disabilities. With the passage of major educational reform initiatives, including Goals 2000: The Educate America Act and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, increased emphasis has been placed on transition from school to employment for all students. Rarely have educational programs been directed to serve students with and without disabilities simultaneously. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates that all children with disabilities must have available to them a free, appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for employment and independent living. Unlike IDEA, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act does not guarantee students with disabilities the right to participate in school-to-work activities. However, these students have as much right to participate as their non-disabled peers. To ensure the full participation of youth with disabilities in school-to-work initiatives, it is imperative that special educators, rehabilitation professionals, advocates for persons with disabilities and parents not only share what are known to be the most effective practices in transitioning youth with disabilities from school to work, but also be active participants in the development and implementation of the larger school-to-work initiatives.

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