



Overlooked and Underserved

Debunking the Asian “Model Minority” Myth in California Schools

For too long, California’s policymakers and educators have paid scant attention to the academic performance of the state’s Asian, Filipino, and Pacific Islander students.

Comprising 12 percent of the total student population, these three are among the state’s fastest growing racial and ethnic groups. Together, they constitute the third-largest student group after Latinos and whites.

Many observers consider Asian-American students a “model minority.” That is, according to this view, even though Asian and Pacific Islanders are racial and ethnic minorities, and many often are first-generation or low-income students, their work ethic and intellectual drive ensures success in school.

This perspective ignores the reality that Asian and Pacific Islander students differ considerably in language, economic status, and country of origin. As a result, their educational outcomes and needs vary widely. Some student subgroups, such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Asian Indians, perform well, surpassing averages posted by any other racial subgroup, including white students. Yet other subgroups of Asian and Pacific Islanders perform at substantially lower levels. Sweeping these disparate populations into one category, however, camouflages their diversity. As a result, Asian and Pacific Islander students who struggle in school often fail to get the attention and resources they need.

California’s methods of collecting and reporting student data perpetuate this problem. Although the state releases some achievement data by Asian and Pacific Islander subgroup, much of the relevant data are unavailable. Currently, no public information exists by subgroup on K-12 and college enrollment, high school graduation and dropout rates, California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) results,

or college success rates. Without these data, the state will continue to shortchange low-performing students, English-language learners (ELLs), and low-income students of Asian and Pacific Islander heritage.

In this brief, we will look past the myth of the “model minority” and present a nuanced view of student achievement among Asian and Pacific Islanders. We conclude with recommendations on ways California can do a better job of collecting and reporting data so that policymakers and educators can target resources and interventions to the needs of these students.

WHO ARE CALIFORNIA’S ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER STUDENTS?

The California Department of Education reports data on the enrollment and achievement of Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Filipinos. But finding out more about these students is a challenge. How many are from low-income families? How many are English-language learners? How many have special needs? What countries of origin do they represent? It’s impossible to answer these questions directly, as California does not disaggregate much student data on Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders.

At the same time, the state *does* report more comprehensive data within its Standardized Testing and Reporting program. By analyzing participation rates for the California Standards Test (CST) and its results, we can estimate answers to some of the forgoing questions (see Figure 1).

For example, this analysis suggests that one-fifth of Asian and Pacific Islander students are ELLs and native speakers of an Asian or Pacific Island language or dialect. Roughly one-third of Asian and Filipino students and more than half of Pacific Islander students come from low-income families. In fact, certain subgroups of Asian and Pacific Islander students (Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, and Samoan) have some of

the highest rates of poverty and lowest per-capita income of all racial and ethnic subgroups in the state.¹

Moreover, digging deeper into the CST data reveals 14 subgroups of Asian, Pacific Islander, and Filipino students. These data expose varied patterns in achievement and shatter the notion that Asian and Pacific Islander students constitute a homogenous population that performs at uniformly high levels. Indeed, these data reveal that East Asian and South Asian students significantly outperform their Southeast Asian counterparts. What's more, wide disparities exist even among these high-performing groups of students in socioeconomics, language fluency, and patterns of recent immigration. Within the Pacific Islander category, Samoan students demonstrate the lowest academic performance of all subgroups.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

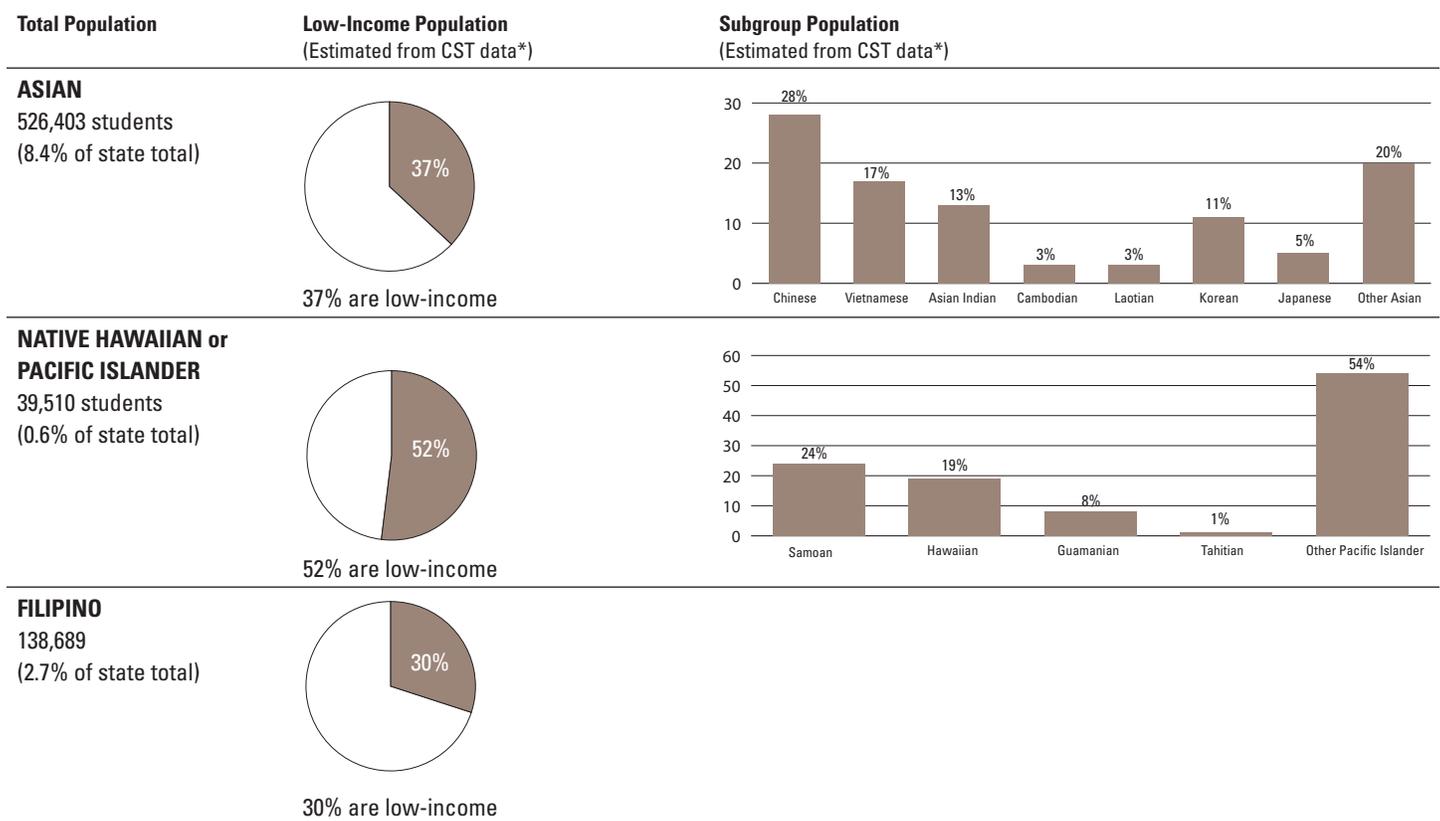
At the elementary level, Asian, Filipino, and Pacific Islander students achieve proficiency in English language arts at higher rates than their white, Latino, and African-American peers. Without further analyzing and disaggregating these data, we could easily make erroneous assumptions about the perfor-

mance of all Asian and Pacific Islander subgroups.

However, dramatic gaps in English achievement appear across the 14 subgroups. For example, Figure 2 shows that among students of Asian heritage, 89 percent of Chinese students achieved proficiency in English, but only 64 percent of Cambodian and 57 percent of Laotian students did so. Similarly, within the Pacific Islander subgroup, almost 20 percentage points separate students from Guam (72 percent) and Samoa (53 percent).

In mathematics, fourth-grade Asian and Filipino students outperform their white peers, with 88 percent and 81 percent achieving proficiency, respectively, compared with 78 percent of whites (see Figure 3). Pacific Islander students lag behind, with only 65 percent reaching proficiency. Once again, the data show these averages of Asian and Pacific Islander students can hide more than they reveal. When the data are further disaggregated, striking gaps exist among fourth-grade Chinese students (93 percent proficient), Cambodian students (74 percent), and Laotian students (69 percent). For Pacific Islander students, a 22 percentage-point gap emerges between Tahitian and Samoan students.

FIGURE 1: CALIFORNIA'S ASIAN STUDENT POPULATION



* K-12 enrollment and economic data by Asian/Pacific Islander subgroup currently are unavailable. Enrollment and socioeconomic data by subgroup are estimates from California Standards Test data; these data only account for students in grades 2-11 who took CST tests in 2008-09.

¹ "The State of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Health in California." A report from the California Asian Pacific Islander Joint Legislative Caucus. www.aasc.ucla.edu/policy/State_AAHPIL_Health.pdf.

FIGURE 2: CST FOURTH-GRADE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTS RESULTS BY ETHNICITY AND SUBGROUP, 2009

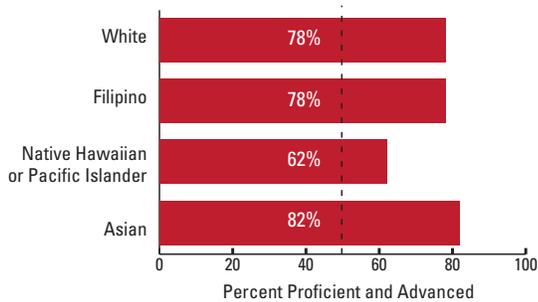
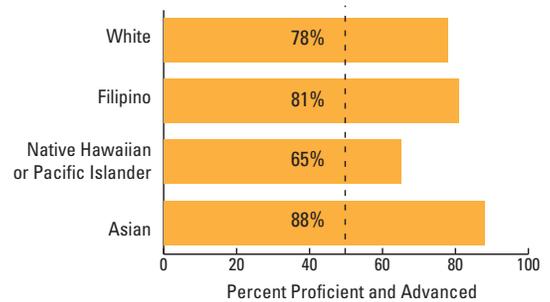


FIGURE 3: CST FOURTH-GRADE MATH RESULTS BY ETHNICITY AND SUBGROUP, 2009



Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Subgroup	Proficient + Advanced
Guamanian	72%
Hawaiian	71%
Other Pacific Islander	62%
Tahitian	53%
Samoan	53%

Asian Subgroup	Proficient + Advanced
Chinese	89%
Korean	88%
Japanese	87%
Asian Indian	85%
Vietnamese	80%
Other Asian	71%
Cambodian	64%
Laotian	57%

Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Subgroup	Proficient + Advanced
Tahitian	82%
Hawaiian	71%
Guamanian	68%
Other Pacific Islander	62%
Samoan	60%

Asian Subgroup	Proficient + Advanced
Chinese	93%
Korean	93%
Japanese	91%
Vietnamese	89%
Asian Indian	87%
Other Asian	78%
Cambodian	74%
Laotian	69%

Source: California Department of Education, 2009.

Disaggregating the data by income reveals further disparities. Fourth-grade English scores are 24 percentage points higher for high-income Asian students than for their low-income peers (90 percent versus 66 percent). Similarly, there is a 22 percentage-point gap between affluent Pacific Islander students and those of modest means (74 percent versus 52 percent). Among Filipino students, the income gap stands at 13 percentage points (82 percent versus 69 percent). Math scores expose similar though less pronounced patterns. The gap in math proficiency between students from affluent and low-income families stands at 14 points for Asians, 17 points for Pacific Islanders, and 10 points for Filipinos.

These gaps reveal the socioeconomic disparities across the broad categories of Asian, Pacific Islander, and Filipino students. However, data by income for Chinese and other Asian students currently are unavailable. Similarly, the state does not provide other vital demographic data beyond ethnicity and

income. For example, the state’s data system does not allow users to obtain information about the achievement of Hmong students who recently migrated or Vietnamese students who are English-language learners. Greater detail about the performance of Asian and Pacific Islander subgroups would help educators understand and meet their needs.

SECONDARY SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

Some Asian and Pacific Islander students continue to excel in middle school, but other subgroups’ results mirror the proficiency rates of groups traditionally underserved by California’s education system. In eighth grade, for example, Asian students continue to outperform their white peers by a 72 percent to 66 percent margin in achieving English proficiency (see Figure 4). However, further disaggregation of English language arts scores reveals that Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Asian Indian, Filipino, and Vietnamese eighth-grade students all perform at

FIGURE 4: CST EIGHTH-GRADE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTS RESULTS BY ETHNICITY AND SUBGROUP, 2009

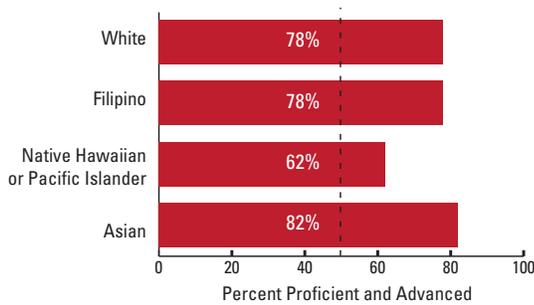
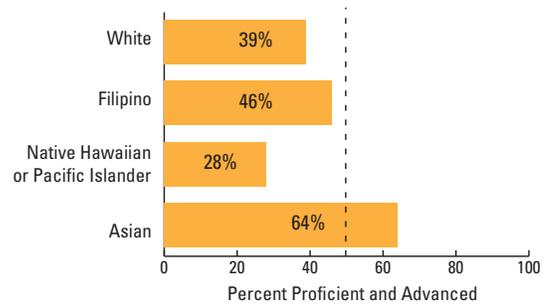


FIGURE 5: CST END-OF-COURSE ALGEBRA I RESULTS BY ETHNICITY AND SUBGROUP, 2009



Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Subgroup	Proficient + Advanced
Hawaiian	52%
Guamanian	50%
Tahitian	48%
Other Pacific Islander	46%
Samoan	32%

Asian Subgroup	Proficient + Advanced
Chinese	81%
Korean	79%
Japanese	79%
Asian Indian	73%
Vietnamese	71%
Other Asian	62%
Cambodian	46%
Laotian	40%

Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Subgroup	Proficient + Advanced
Guamanian	32%
Other Pacific Islander	29%
Hawaiian	27%
Tahitian	27%
Samoan	23%

Asian Subgroup	Proficient + Advanced
Korean	79%
Chinese	77%
Japanese	67%
Vietnamese	65%
Asian Indian	59%
Other Asian	51%
Cambodian	35%
Laotian	35%

Source: California State University, Early Assessment Program data, 2009

relatively high levels, ranging from 81 percent to 71 percent. In comparison, only 46 percent of Cambodian and 40 percent of Laotian students reach proficiency.

Among Pacific Islander students, only 44 percent attain proficiency in eighth-grade English language arts. Hawaiian, Guamanian, Tahitian, and other Pacific Islander subgroups achieve proficiency at rates ranging from 46 percent to 52 percent. Samoan eighth-graders, meanwhile, stand in stark contrast: Only 32 percent reached proficiency in 2009.

Performance differences among Asian and Pacific Islander subgroups appear not only in English but also in mathematics. Algebra I is a critical stepping stone to the higher level mathematics students need to succeed in college and a career. Yet a staggering 36 percentage-point gap in performance exists between Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders who took the end-of-course Algebra I exam (see Figure 5). Once again, the all-encompassing “Asian” and “Pacific Islander” categories

hide vast underlying differences among subgroups. For example, 79 percent of Korean students reached proficiency in Algebra I, though only 35 percent of Laotian and 23 percent of Samoan students scored at that level.

For all Asian and Pacific Islander subgroups, the data worsen by the time students take Algebra II, which the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems require for admission. In that upper level math course, only 54 percent of Asian, 30 percent of Filipino, and 23 percent of Pacific Islander students scored proficient. Again, disaggregating by subgroups exposes highly variable performance, with significant achievement gaps evident between Korean and Samoan students, for example.

LOST OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESS

Data reveal a disconnect between high school graduation and college readiness among Asian and Pacific Islanders. By the

end of high school, 91 percent of Asian students completed graduation requirements and earned a diploma in 2008. Yet only 59 percent of those graduates completed the A-G course sequence required for UC and CSU admission. Filipino and Pacific Islander students completed the A-G sequence at even lower rates—45 percent and 27 percent, respectively.

By comparison, 40 percent of white students and 34 percent of all California students completed the A-G curriculum. It is likely that some subgroups of Asian and Pacific Islander students finish the required A-G courses at far higher rates than others. Unfortunately, the California Department of Education does not disaggregate these indicators further, preventing us from examining those differences.

Even if students complete the A-G course requirements necessary for admission to a four-year California university, they may be ill-equipped for college-level work. California's voluntary Early Assessment Program measures preparation for college among eleventh-graders. Results from this exam reveal

that by the end of high school most Asian and Pacific students lack the skills needed for college-level English and math coursework (see Figures 6 and 7).

Although 43 percent of eleventh-grade Chinese and 41 percent of Korean students are ready for college-level math, just 10 percent of Filipinos, 10 percent of Cambodians, 7 percent of Laotians, and 5 percent of Samoans are similarly prepared. Patterns in English language arts are comparable, with Chinese, Korean, and Japanese students about six times more likely to be ready for college-level work in English than Samoan and Laotian students. Beyond the striking differences among subgroups, these results also underscore that about seven out of ten Asian students are not equipped for college-level coursework.

Asian and Pacific Islander college-going rates, then, should come as no surprise. In 2008, 37 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander high school graduates enrolled in a UC or CSU as first-time freshmen. However, the UC and CSU systems do not

FIGURE 6: CALIFORNIA EARLY ASSESSMENT PROGRAM, ENGLISH RESULTS BY ETHNICITY AND SUBGROUP, 2009

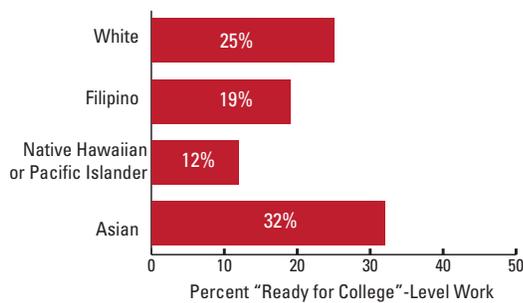
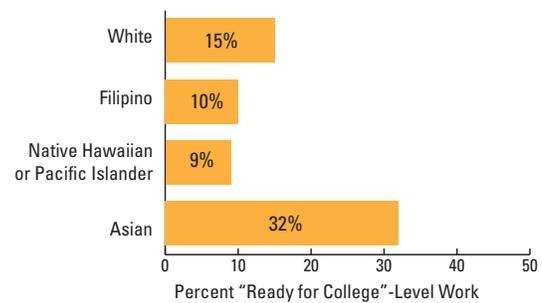


FIGURE 7: CALIFORNIA EARLY ASSESSMENT PROGRAM MATH RESULTS BY ETHNICITY AND SUBGROUP, 2009



Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Subgroup	Ready for College-Level Work
Guamanian	17%
Hawaiian	15%
Other Pacific Islander	13%
Samoan	7%
Tahitian	4%

Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Subgroup	Ready for College-Level Work
Guamanian	11%
Other Pacific Islander	10%
Hawaiian	9%
Tahitian	7%
Samoan	5%

Asian Subgroup	Ready for College-Level Work
Chinese	41%
Korean	38%
Japanese	37%
Asian Indian	31%
Vietnamese	27%
Other Asian	25%
Cambodian	11%
Laotian	6%

Asian Subgroup	Ready for College-Level Work
Chinese	43%
Korean	41%
Japanese	29%
Asian Indian	27%
Vietnamese	25%
Other Asian	21%
Cambodian	10%
Laotian	7%

Source: California State University, Early Assessment Program data, 2009

report detailed data on the enrollment of subgroups of these students. In fact, the University of California aggregates them into a single category. Without disaggregation, the data mask subgroup disparities that K-12 achievement data suggest are likely to exist in UC and CSU enrollment rates.

HIDDEN DETAILS OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Gauging the achievement of Asian and Pacific Islanders accurately means acknowledging the diverse experiences of their subgroups. Although some subgroups excel, others have been persistently underserved by California schools. Limited data, however, restrict what we know about their achievement. Consider what is now absent from publicly reported data:

- Basic enrollment and demographic data by Asian and Pacific Islander subgroup;
- CAHSEE results, graduation and dropout rates, and A-G graduation rates by Asian and Pacific Islander subgroup;
- Data on academic performance by income status and country of origin (despite CST results that permit cross-tabulations among ethnicity and economic status for the broad categories of Asian, Pacific Islander, and Filipino);
- Information on the performance of the roughly 22 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander students who are English-language learners; and
- Data on the achievement patterns of students who are recent immigrants.

When policymakers and educators fail to account for these important factors, the prevailing myth of Asians as the “model minority” becomes the governing paradigm. Although the mind-set affects all Asian and Pacific Islander students, those with additional needs—recent immigrants, low-income students, English-language learners, and low-performing students—suffer most from this myth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The limited data available reveal alarming disparities in achievement among subgroups of Asian and Pacific Islanders. Yet the state fails to release a wide range of data needed to identify critical achievement and opportunity gaps. These data have the potential to highlight inequities now masked by aggregate statistics. Because this information remains unavailable, however, segments of the Asian and Pacific Islander population will remain overlooked and underserved in California’s public schools. Our recommendations, therefore, call on

the state’s K-12 and university systems to start collecting and reporting more data for Asian and Pacific Islander students.

California law already requires that state agencies, including the California Department of Education, use separate categories and tabulations for each major Asian and Pacific Islander group. These include Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, Asian Indian, Hawaiian, Guamanian, Samoan, Laotian, and Cambodian.² In addition, the law grants agencies the flexibility to expand upon current demographic categories.

However, the law does not require public release of these disaggregated data. We urge the Department of Education both to collect and report disaggregated data on Asian and Pacific Islander subgroups when those counts are numerically significant. In addition, we encourage policymakers to support legislation to expand the required subgroups and align reporting requirements with collection requirements.

Whether voluntarily or through legislation, the state should disaggregate the following data sets:

- **Enrollment Data:** Break down accurate enrollment data by Asian and Pacific Islander subgroup to show enrollment and demographic patterns in California schools. These data also should reveal how many students in each subgroup are from low-income families, English-language learners, and receive special education services.
- **High School Data:** Disaggregate CAHSEE pass rates, dropout rates, graduation rates, and A-G graduation rates by Asian and Pacific Islander subgroup to provide a clear picture of success in high school and access to higher education.
- **Achievement Data:** Release CST results by Asian subgroup on ELLs and low-income students so that we can ensure resources are targeted toward areas of need.

In addition to making these reporting changes, the state should reexamine subgroup minimums used for accountability purposes. This will help prevent decision makers from overlooking Asian, Pacific Islander, and Filipino students when calculating Academic Performance Index scores and gauging Adequate Yearly Progress for schools and districts.

By collecting and reporting important data on subgroups of Asian and Pacific Islanders, California can arm educators and policymakers with the information they need to better serve more of our state’s fast-growing student populations.

² California Government Code, 8310.5

DATA SOURCES

California Department of Education, DataQuest. www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/dataquest.asp.
California Department of Education, Ed-Data. www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/welcome.asp.
California Postsecondary Education Commission, Ethnicity Snapshots. www.cpec.ca.gov/StudentData/EthSnapshotMenu.asp.
California State University, Early Assessment Program (EAP). <http://eap2008.ets.org/>.
“Raising the Roof,” An Education Data Tool from Education Trust–West. <http://rtr.edtrustwest.org/>.

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

“Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders—Facts, Not Fiction: Setting the Record Straight.” The College Board, 2008.
“The Diverse Face of Asians and Pacific Islanders in California.” Asian Pacific American Legal Center, 2005.



The Education Trust–West

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