



# WRITTEN SUBMISSION TO MANITOBA'S COMMISSION ON KINDERGARTEN TO GRADE 12 EDUCATION

Recommendations towards comprehensive, evidence based  
Sexuality Education

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# Introduction

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The Sexuality Education Resource Centre Manitoba (SERC) promotes sexual health through education to one day have a Manitoba made of a diverse society that celebrates sexuality through life. We do this by providing workshops for a wide variety of audiences. A large portion of our work occurs in schools across Manitoba each year with students and teachers seeking to further their education around sexuality. Last year our workshops were attended by over 27,000 participants. We have been doing this work for 85 years and are considered regional and national experts in delivering quality comprehensive sexuality education.

Outside of schools, we work with individuals who had limited or no sexuality education in their schools, as well as individuals for whom classroom based sexuality education did not meet their social, developmental or cultural needs. Although this is valuable for our participants, it cannot replace the public school system which is the largest platform to provide comprehensive and evidence based sexuality education to Manitobans. When the public has access to comprehensive sexuality education, [it can make a significant positive contribution to the health and well being of a society](#): an investment in comprehensive sexuality education is an investment in quality public health across Manitoba.

In Manitoba Human Sexuality falls within the larger Physical Education and Health Education curriculum. The curriculum addresses 5 major health risks including “[sexual behaviours that result in STIs and unintended pregnancies](#)” as the basis for teaching about sexuality. There is common misconception that sexuality is only the act of having sex. Sexuality includes many other components including bodies, relationships (of all kinds), gender, our thoughts and feelings and values. SERC believes that to address these behaviours there must be a comprehensive approach, and that is currently lacking in the Manitoba Education system.

When sexuality is viewed holistically, sexuality education is more effective, approachable and has applications relevant to more areas of life. This framework also goes beyond behaviours but to also [address attitudes, skills and the environment within which these behaviours exist](#). This approach provides decision making skills and choice to individuals to work from within their own values. For these and many other reasons, we believe that sexuality education is not a niche interest in the education system, but a core subject in dire need of attention. There is a saying that the best sexuality education is the truth. The truth in Manitoba is that we are currently:

- Teaching to learning outcomes that were released in 2000 and therefore do not reflect the sexuality education needs of the young people it is supposed to be reaching
- [Experiencing a syphilis outbreak](#) including a [spike in congenital syphilis cases](#)
- [4<sup>th</sup> of provinces and territories in Canada](#) for highest teenage pregnancy rate
- [17% of Manitoba youth](#) that are sexuality active report having sex when they did not want to

The truth is that we need to do better. We welcome the invitation to help Manitoba improve through this review. The current curriculum is leaving many with more questions than answers, and is not producing the positive health outcomes that should be associated with sexuality education. Even more concerning is that many youth are receiving no sexuality education at all.

This is why we are strongly advocating for comprehensive, inclusive and evidence based sexuality education to the Manitoba Education Review. In this document we will define what comprehensive sexuality education is and how to achieve it. We believe these changes have far reaching benefits for all of Manitoba.

# Recommendations Summary

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To do better for Manitoba, SERC recommends the following actions:

1. **Manitoba needs to move from a risk based sexuality education curriculum to a balanced comprehensive approach that includes consent, pleasure, rights and harm reduction.**  
Comprehensive sexuality education goes beyond the science of how bodies work and how babies are made. It includes [rights](#), consent, pleasure and harm reduction. This approach has been shown to create [healthy behaviour change](#).
2. **The sexuality components of the Manitoba Physical Education and Health Education Curriculum need to be updated.**  
The curriculum framework of outcomes was released in 2000. The [Manitoba Teachers Society](#) recommends updating any curriculum older than 7 years old.
3. **Sexuality education needs to start before Grade 5, and should be woven throughout multiple subjects.**  
This sentiment of early years education is backed by the [province's own website](#), however, in practice this often does not happen.
4. **Manitoba needs to provide resources (financial and otherwise) to decolonizing curriculum, including sexuality education.**  
The [Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action #62 and 63](#) recommend training for teachers to include Indigenous knowledge. This would include knowledge around sexuality education.
5. **Curriculum, resources and all supporting documents need to reflect sexual, gender and relationship diversity to provide relevant education for all students.**  
Current provincial sexuality education resources display a bias to uphold heterosexual (“straight”) and cisgender (“non-transgender”) identities leaving many students without relevant education. This does not live up to schools’ [respect for human diversity policies](#) or the province’s own [Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Manitoba’s Schools](#) document. This is true for sexuality and curricula of all other subjects.
6. **Sexuality education must be taught to reach all students in every school throughout Manitoba.**  
Differing policies asking families to opt-in or opt-out of sexuality education creates inconsistencies in the quality of education from division to division, school to school and student to student. This leads to inequitable health outcomes for different individuals and communities.
7. **Sexuality education needs to address gender and power in relationships.**  
Sexual health outcomes are impacted by personal identity. Without an [analysis of how gender, masculinity and power impact relationships](#) we are not preparing young people - especially girls, women and gender diverse students - for success.
8. **Manitoba needs to provide culturally safe and trauma informed training for teachers.**  
Not everyone’s experience with sexuality is positive and it can be traumatic to discuss. This is also true for racialized students whose bodies and cultures aren’t reflected in lessons and resources. By being trauma informed, [lessons will be more accessible to students](#).

# Recommendation's Expanded Analysis

## Recommendation #1:

Manitoba needs to move from a risk based sexuality education curriculum to a balanced comprehensive approach that includes consent, pleasure, rights and harm reduction.

All major organizations providing information on sexuality education including the [United Nations](#), [Public Health Agency of Canada](#), [Sex & Information Education Council of Canada \(SIECCAN\)](#), and [Action Canada for Sexual & Reproductive Rights](#) advocate for comprehensive sexuality education. Comprehensive sexuality education looks at sexual and reproductive health as holistic and made up of related parts. Rather than solely discussing the risks of STIs and pregnancy, [comprehensive sexuality education discusses the relationships involved in sex and celebrates the positive and pleasurable aspects of why people have sex](#). Discussing both pleasure and protection is a human rights and consent based practice. [Healthy sexuality is not just the absence of infections, but also includes](#) healthy, pleasurable relationships that may or may not be sexual in nature.

This approach of balancing risks with pleasure is more realistic and [effective for learners](#). It meets people where they are at by not only providing information and skills, but also addressing the emotional motivation to partake in healthy behaviors as well as environmental factors that can create barriers to healthy choices.

Manitoba's curriculum already provides multiple options for students to choose from when making healthy decisions. Because the curriculum is risk based conversations are more likely to present unbalanced or even biased information. [Most people in Manitoba will be sexually active in their lifetime](#) and in a [2014 study 60% of teens aged 15-19 years old in Winnipeg were sexually active](#). Reflecting this reality requires a transition from thinking of sex as a 'risk' to discussing sexuality as something we all have in common and what the options are for us to increase our health.

[SIECCAN has released a draft of core principles](#) to guide all sexuality education. Recommendation #1 would follow these principles for sexuality education including:

- “Is broadly based in scope and depth and addresses a range of topics relevant to sexual health and well-being”
- “Promotes human rights including autonomous decision making and respect for the rights of others”
- “Incorporates a balanced approach to sexual health promotion that includes the positive aspects of sexuality and relationships, as well as prevention of sexual health problems”

## Recommendation #2:

The sexuality components of the Manitoba Physical Education and Health Education Curriculum need to be updated.

The sexuality framework of outcomes of the physical education and health education curriculum were released in 2000. To put this in perspective, the students receiving this education were not even born yet. This was five years before Youtube (2005) was launched and Canada legalized same sex marriage (2005). Pornhub and iPhones did not yet exist (2007) and gender identity or expression weren't protected under the Canadian Human Rights Act (2017).

The Manitoba sexual health curriculum reflects a world that youth of today (and people of many ages) do not recognize. Sexuality wasn't yet fully digital, nor was it in hand-held portable devices. Although a full spectrum of sexual and gender diversity was represented in Canadian society, this was not yet recognized in human rights protections in Canada, and the average Canadian did not have the language to discuss sexual and gender diversity in a respectful or realistic way. The ramifications all these societal changes have had on relationships, youth and sexuality need to be addressed for the curriculum to be relevant.

We endorse [Manitoba Teachers' Society recommendation #6](#) asking Manitoba to review and update any curriculum over 7 years old. Under this recommendation, the human sexuality curriculum is twice overdue and needs immediate attention.

This recommendation falls under the [SIECCAN draft principles](#) of:

- “Is responsive to and incorporates emerging issues related to sexual health and well-being”
- “Is inclusive of the identities and lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, Two Spirit (LGBTQI2S+) and asexual people.”

## Recommendation #3:

Sexuality education needs to start before Grade 5, and should be woven throughout multiple subjects.

Although the Manitoba sexuality education curriculum begins at Kindergarten and has learning outcomes listed in Grade 2, the curriculum could be expanded to be comprehensive, and include more learning outcomes for younger years. At least, sexuality education for early years can be used to develop vocabulary to discuss more complex concepts at grades 5 and 7 when students are experiencing puberty and are ready for deeper conversations. It would be even better to teach early year's students about consent, bodily autonomy, gender and diverse families. These conversations are crucial in younger years with [research suggesting](#) that [teaching about consent](#) and [names of body parts in younger years reduces the risk of sexual abuse](#).

By defining sexuality starting in early years, we can dispel myths and better support families to discuss values at age appropriate levels at home. In a SERC workshop we often begin with a wider definition of what sexuality is as most people think of it as only the act of sexual intercourse. This narrow definition of sexuality is often shared by students, teachers, administrations and family members of all ages. A comprehensive approach includes relationships of all kind, how our bodies change, gender, how we feel and think about all this and, how these are all guided by our values.

Recently Manitoba updated their Human Ecology/Family Studies curriculum to include information on a tool SERC uses called the Sexuality Wheel ([Family Studies learning outcome 9.3.3.4](#)). The sexuality wheel is a tool to expand on sexuality, showing how the various parts connect and change over time. This part of the curriculum is for students learning about early childhood education to look at sexuality holistically and apply the concepts to early childhood education. Manitoba should be using a tool like the sexuality wheel in early years already. This would be one of many easy updates to early years curricula.

There can be a fear in communities about the sexuality curriculum. There is a misconception that young children will be taught about how to have sexual intercourse and be forced into thinking they are transgender or be confused. By teaching sexuality starting at younger ages we can dispel these myths and reinforce that we are teaching about respect for and ownership of one's own body and identity. When it is explained what sexuality is and what the curriculum includes, [students and guardians](#) are supportive of comprehensive sexuality education.

This recommendation falls under the [SIECCAN draft principles](#) of:

- “Is accessible to all people regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, sexually transmitted and blood borne infections (STBBI) status, geographic location, socio-economic status, cultural or religious background, ability or housing status.”

## Recommendation #4:

Manitoba needs to provide resources (financial and otherwise) to decolonizing curriculum, including sexuality education.

The [Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action #62 and #63](#) speak to Indigenous knowledge and methods being integrated into the classroom as well as building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect. There is definitely room for this to happen within sexuality education.

This is work that SERC is doing internally and cannot claim to be experts on. However, there are many examples of this work being done in Manitoba. Our [Teen Talk program](#) has some examples of how to do this work, as do [Ka Ni Kanichihk](#), [Sunshine House](#) and [Two-Spirited People of Manitoba](#). Nationally, the [Native Youth Sexual Health Network](#) has done extensive work around this issue as well.

The Native Youth Sexual Healthy Network and Action Canada co-authored a [document in 2016](#) outlining the health disparities Indigenous peoples experience around sexual and reproductive health. There are recommendations based in rights and international law.

Some examples of Indigenous sexuality education include berry fasts, vision quests and other land based sexuality education. More generally there could be lessons on how gender is culturally defined and how residential schools violently enforced a ‘western’ idea of gender. This has effects on individuals and communities in how they view themselves and their self-esteem. This could be connected to conversations about Two Spirited people currently advocating for their inclusion in the TRC report and [protection of their rights](#).

The main focus of this recommendation is providing equitable opportunities for Indigenous students, however all students will benefit from these changes.

This recommendation falls under the [SIECCAN draft principles](#) of:

- “Promotes human rights including autonomous decision making and respect for the rights of others”
- “Is accessible to all people regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, STBBI status, geographic location, socio-economic status, cultural or religious background, ability or housing status.”

## Recommendation #5:

Curriculum, resources and all supporting documents need to reflect sexual, gender and relationship diversity to provide relevant education for all students.

[Best practices in diversity education](#) discuss equity rather than equality. While equality is a positive viewpoint to have, not all people are equal or the same; hence the importance of recognizing and celebrating diversity. There should be an equality of opportunity, but this is achieved through considering different situations and coming up with multiple, equitable paths to success.

When sexuality education only discusses cisgender, heterosexual, monogamous relationships we are perpetuating disrespectful and unsafe environments for all students. [Research shows that all students, including cisgender and heterosexual students](#) are negatively impacted by homophobic and transphobic school environments. Certain community members express concern about a 2STLGBQ+ agenda or values being enforced on their children by mentioning certain identities. However, upholding only cisgender and heterosexual identities is an agenda and a value that is discriminatory.

As was mentioned previously in this document, values are a part of sexuality. The role of a school isn’t to teach values beyond the universal values of respect, knowledge and healthy communities while other values can be taught at home. Acknowledging multiple identities simply is an acknowledgement of the truth in Manitoba: that there are diverse sexual, gender and relationship identities of the people who live here. Acknowledging your neighbor’s existence isn’t a value, it is a truth and the best sex education is the truth.

[Research shows that youth do want to learn](#) about identity and diversity in sex ed. Youth also learn about sexuality from their peers and media. Even if these topics aren’t discussed in the classroom, they will still be discussed by youth. At SERC we value the abilities of a trained professional like a teacher over gossip of peers and the internet.

This issue also spreads beyond sexuality education, as diverse sexual, gender and relationship identities should be reflected across all subject areas. Often 2STLGBQ+ people are viewed as sexualized objects and not whole beings. By only bringing up 2STLGBQ+ identities in context of sexuality education, this myth is perpetuated and does more harm to an already marginalized community.

This recommendation falls under the [SIECCAN draft principles](#) of:

- “Is inclusive of the identities and lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, Two Spirit (LGBTQI2S+) and asexual people.”

## Recommendation #6:

Sexuality education must be taught to reach all students in every school throughout Manitoba.

In our experience working with various schools across Manitoba, each division and sometimes each school within a division will have a different policy on families opting out of sexuality education. This inconsistency leaves some divisions and schools with little to no sexuality education while others receive fairly comprehensive lessons. [Despite everyone having a right to sexuality education](#), the [access to such education](#) changes drastically depending on the division or school you attend. This is clearly a violation of each student’s right to access sexuality education and equitable health services.

SERC believes that Human Sexuality is rightfully a part of the curriculum and should not be opted out of. There is no opt out for math, science or writing; and this subject should not be treated differently. Many people would argue that human sexuality is a “sensitive topic”. Manitoba curriculum identifies human sexuality, substance use and abuse prevention and personal safety as [“potentially sensitive”](#). While we would agree that sexuality can be hard to discuss for many reasons and needs to be [trauma informed](#) (more about this later), we know that educators are teaching about war, residential schools and other human rights violations which can be difficult.

Comprehensive sexuality education takes into account that the topics can be sensitive for many reasons, however, like with other subjects, silence doesn’t lead to positive change but reinforces negative status quos. This is why we teach these sensitive and sometimes hard to discuss subjects.

Even with the potentially sensitive label and the ability for families to opt their student out of classroom based learning, there is still an obligation for the content to be delivered by an alternative method. However, in practice there isn’t always follow up to ensure the content was delivered. Practices range from teachers providing work to be completed at home, to the student sitting in an alternative setting segregated during the sexuality lessons with no follow up, to sexuality not being taught in the school at all. Teachers can be more effective at teaching sexuality education when they have clear policies and administrative support that values this subject area. Not valuing sexuality education is not valuing public health.

Comprehensive sexuality education allows parents to be informed about what their children are being taught in school, and does not impinge on their ability to have values based conversations about these issues at home. On

the other hand, not providing inclusive and comprehensive sexuality education on the basis of misinformation or values is an injustice to the protected human rights of 2STLGBQ+ students, teachers and families; and puts students at risk for harmful experiences.

Parents and guardians have the right to know what their children are being taught in schools and receive support from schools to further conversations at home in order to share their family values. However, that right is not in conflict with, nor does it supersede a student's right to an evidence based education that promotes information towards healthy sexuality.

This recommendation falls under the [SIECCAN draft principles](#) of:

- “Is accessible to all people regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, STBBI status, geographic location, socio-economic status, cultural or religious background, ability or housing status.”
- “Promotes human rights including autonomous decision-making and respect for the rights of others.”
- “Is provided by educators who have the knowledge and skills to deliver comprehensive sexual health education and who receive administrative support.”

## Recommendation #7:

Sexuality education needs to address gender and power in relationships.

We need to address gender and power in sexuality education. Issues like Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2 Spirit people, #MeToo and access to reproductive health are all present in students' lives. These issues are all impacted by gender and power.

Recent research looking at sexuality education programs from 1990-2012 separated programs that addressed gender and power from those that did not. [The research found that the programs that address gender and power were five times more effective than those that did not.](#) Unintended pregnancies involve more than one person and often the dynamics of birth control and boundaries are affected by gender differences. Similarly, STBBI rates and testing are affected by gender dynamics. There is an increasing awareness of beauty standards, [media literacy](#) and [digital communication](#) that affects youth differently based on gender. If we aren't discussing gender with students, we aren't talking about the world they live in, evidence shows that including an analysis of gender and power creates more effective sexuality education.

The Manitoba curriculum mentions discussing gender differences, but there is no mention of power within those relationships. Curriculum support documents should prioritize gender and power analysis to make lessons more effective.

This recommendation falls under the [SIECCAN draft principles](#) of:

- “Promotes gender equality and the prevention of sexual and gender based violence”
- “Is responsive and incorporates emerging issues related to sexual health and well being”

## Recommendation #8:

Manitoba needs to provide culturally safe and trauma informed training for teachers.

Being trauma informed is essential to our work as part of our work is being prepared for disclosures of abuse or trauma from our workshop participants. Being trauma informed means setting up environments where people can participate in a way that is safe for them and that issues can be discussed in a non-judgmental way.

Setting up such an environment involves more than sending letters home to families about ‘sensitive issues’. Informing students and families of the topics being covered is a good practice, but cannot stand on its own. In our workshops we acknowledge discomfort and the giggles that will come up when discussing sexuality. [We establish participant’s rights, use inclusive language that avoids shame](#), take all questions seriously and don’t censor our age appropriate answers to those questions. In other words, as facilitators, we meet people where they are at with their comfort level, affirm those feelings, but show no fear ourselves. The results of that approach is more questions from students and one of the most common statements of feedback we receive on our evaluations is that students want more time on the subject.

Teachers understandably like having guest speakers to discuss “potentially sensitive” and personal topics such as sexuality. However, when teachers are given the training to create the right environment with support from admin, the questions and answers come. Systematically the culture of fear around sexuality education needs to change for teachers and administration to be successful.

In other words, the current policy and way we speak about sexuality education teaches students that it shouldn’t be discussed. This silence and stigma puts people at risk of STBBIs and unintended pregnancy, we need to take fear out of the curriculum.

This recommendation falls under the [SIECCAN draft principles](#) of:

- “Is scientifically accurate and uses evidence-based teaching methods”
- “Is provided by educators who have the knowledge and skills to deliver comprehensive sexual health education and who receive administrative support.”

# Additional Comments and Analysis

## Sexuality is not a niche or special subject area.

We recognize that teachers' and students' time is preciously divided by many priorities. The benefit of comprehensive sexuality education is that much of it crosses curriculum and subject area. Lessons on consent, rights, healthy relationships, pleasure, communication and negotiation and self-image have benefits and applications for all school and community environments.

In classrooms of all grade levels, guidelines, rules and/or rights will be discussed at the beginning and through the school year. Skills and knowledge from healthy relationship lessons are applicable in each classroom to create a respectful atmosphere. While it is important to discuss romantic and sexual relationships, the same skills of establishing boundaries, communicating and respecting bodily autonomy is applicable to all relationships, including student to student, and improves the school environment.

Building students into full citizens as a part of society requires a knowledge of rights. Social studies curriculum has many different lessons on human rights. Sexual and reproductive rights are a part of human rights history but also the present we are living in that effect students' lives. Throughout Manitoba and in some schools there are teen clinics to provide increased health care access to youth. These same youth need to be aware of their rights and know they can access these services confidentially. This knowledge reduces even more barriers for young people accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare.

A lack of 2STLGBQ+ inclusion in school leads [2STLGBQ+ students to lack an attachment to their school leading to skipping school and dropping out](#). The [same is true](#) for students with 2STLGBQ+ parents. This same denial of existence has a toll on [2STLGBQ+ teachers and staff](#). In 2004, [over 15% of young women that dropped out](#) of high school in Canada did so because of pregnancy. A lack of comprehensive sexuality education is leading young people to leave the education system to take care of their own needs.

Furthermore, bullying and the respect for human diversity is an ongoing concern in schools. [64% of transgender and gender diverse students feel unsafe in Manitoban schools. 39% of high school students have been body shamed, with girls more likely to be socially or cyber bullied](#). By having a comprehensive sexuality curriculum that addresses self-image, pleasure and diversity, it sets up schools to lead by example. If there are no messages about these topics coming from the classroom, then what is already out there in the hallways will prevail. [By sending a positive message and being proactive, schools will be much more effective battling bullying, rather than taking only a punitive approach](#).

This addresses the education review topic area of student learning accountability. The accountability is on many individuals and layers of society including the student. If school policy is related to and reflected by what is taught in the classroom, students become part of that society rather than a non-active participant being molded by it or dropping out altogether. Many teachers and schools are taking this holistic approach, but it is not consistent across Manitoba. Even the schools that take on this approach need more resources and support to keep up in an ever changing world.

## Additional Training for Teachers

[Manitoba Teachers Society recommendations 12 and 13](#) ask for resources for professional development to address diverse and complex classes. In this document we have addressed the need for training around trauma and Indigenous knowledge within sexuality education. We also touched on the need for information on digital literacy, gender and sexual identity which has changed considerably since teachers were students receiving sexuality education themselves. There is no shortage of diverse and complex topics to be addressed within sexuality education.

Students with disabilities are an example of another population experiencing health disparities due to a lack of education. Research places young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities at [greater risk of STIs, unintended pregnancy and sexual abuse](#) than their peers. [Research suggests that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities](#) do not require a ‘special’ curriculum different from other students. However, each student’s learning ability and style needs to be considered to ensure that they receive quality sexuality education. This often means additional resources to teach the same curriculum. Without the proper training and resources for teachers, these students are at a further disadvantage and risk.

It may be outside the scope of this review but we find teachers do not have the basic training on sexuality education to begin addressing these updated topics. Therefore, teachers should have mandatory pre-service training in the basics of sexuality education. With the gaps and inequities in sexuality education that we’ve already identified, having a mandatory training would create a baseline for all educators. Professional development could then be devoted to emerging topics that respond to a changing world. In many schools, teachers still need trainings on the basics, not because they are ineffective at their jobs, but because they have not had access to this information previously. In some schools there are training programs available to teachers on a regular basis to fill this gap. Without mandatory pre-service training, the gaps will remain between divisions and schools.

Mandatory pre-service education on sexuality will increase the quality of education and health for all students.

## Conclusion

Quality sexuality education is based around consent. At the core of consent is the concept that each person’s body is their own- you own your body and you own your future. Understanding consent is critical to navigating healthy relationships with one’s self and others. If we hope to work towards building an education system that creates lifelong learners who are innovative, collaborative, community engaged, critical thinkers and leaders, we need to start with consent.

We want our schools to be places where students are excited to be and to learn. We want to give them the knowledge to build brighter futures. For youth to value learning, we need to value students. Affirming their rights and self-respect through quality sexuality education throughout their education career is a necessary tool for accomplishing those goals. This is the core of evidence based best practices in sexuality education.

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