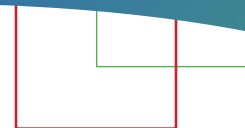




Centering Equity in Data-Based Decision-Making: Considerations and Recommendations for Leadership Teams

Natalie Romer, Nikole Hollins-Sims, Rose Owens-West, Kelly Perales,
Natalie Walrond, Ruthie Payno-Simmons, & Kent McIntosh

A collaboration between the Center to Improve Social
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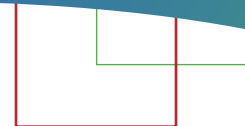
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Overview

The focus of this guide is on providing school, district, and state leadership teams with practices for centering equity in their data-driven decision-making processes as they relate to schoolwide, whole-person initiatives focused on social, emotional, and behavioral health. We introduce key concepts and provide practical strategies, including specific companion dialogue guides to support teams in centering equity in their data-using culture and process, in the types of data they collect and review, in who is informing and making decisions, and in the way they analyze data. The guide concludes with guiding questions for centering equity within a decision-making process.

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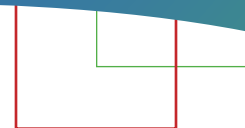
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Sandra Azevedo, Butte County Office of Education

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Introduction

Safe and supportive school environments that promote well-being and healthy social and emotional development are essential to effective teaching, learning, and support of the whole person. We use the term “whole person” to refer to a comprehensive notion of human development across domains (e.g., cultural, physiological, cognitive, behavioral, social, emotional) and consider the multiple interconnected factors that promote or impede well-being and healthy development (Cantor et al., 2019; NCCIH, n.d.). By supporting the whole person, school communities can play an essential role in creating conditions that promote the health, well-being, and learning of each and every student (Office of the Surgeon General [OSG], 2021; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2021).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) are two of many evidence-based frameworks that focus on increasing social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) health by creating safe and supportive conditions for learning and well-being (Durlak et al., in press; Lee & Gage, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2021). These frameworks and others have been evolving to better center equity, in particular racial equity (Fallon et al., 2021; Jagers et al., 2019; Mahoney et al., 2021; McIntosh et al., 2021; Simmons, 2021).

The focus of this guide is on supporting school, district, and state education leadership teams in redesigning and transforming systems for equitable health and learning so that every student may realize their full potential. To achieve that goal, these teams must center equity in all of their work—including the ways in which they gather, analyze, and use data in their schoolwide whole-person work.

Centering equity begins with acknowledging that educational research, practice, assessment, and policies have perpetuated inequitable conditions that cause harm for historically underserved students—and that addressing these inequities involves a relational, strengths-based process that prioritizes the people who are least likely to benefit from current systems (Hammond, 2020; Heifetz et al., 2009; Kania et al., 2018; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Uncovering *why* the system itself is inequitable is a critical first step in creating transformed conditions in which students, families, school staff, and communities can thrive rather than asking them to continue adapting to a failing system (i.e., the status quo). Once the *why* is revealed, the *how* becomes the next critical step.

The goal of this work is not to blame families, communities, students, or staff members for the outcomes displayed in the data but rather to reimagine the system and its conditions so that all students, families, and communities can thrive—especially those who have not historically done so.

To help leadership teams advance equitable change, **Part 1 of this guide** begins by exploring key concepts related to creating safe, inclusive, and positive learning environments; promoting the mental health and well-being of school communities; and ensuring agency, self-determination, and equitable outcomes for each student across all identities, including race/ethnicity, gender, and disability status. In this section, we introduce several key concepts and definitions related to equity, SEB health, systems change, and decision-making and culture that are anchored in data use.

Part 2 of the guide offers teams insight into where to begin, who should be responsible, and how they might proceed in the form of four specific dialogue guides that address the following four questions to help them center equity as they embark upon their data-driven decision-making journey:

1. What are we measuring and why?
2. Who decides what data we need and from whom?
3. How do we analyze our data?
4. How do we use our data to make decisions?

These questions offer leadership teams a map of intentional practices toward becoming better stewards of equitable action. In this section and the appendix, we provide recommendations, dialogue guides, and references to other resources that can support leadership teams in their efforts to center equity in their decision-making.



Part 1: Key Concepts and Definitions

Equity

The central principle of this guide is that school, district, and state education leadership teams should have educational equity as the ultimate focus of all their decisions. For the purposes of this guide, we refer to the definition of **educational equity** created by the Great Lakes Equity Center during the 2013 Equity Leader's Institute (Anderson et al., 2019):

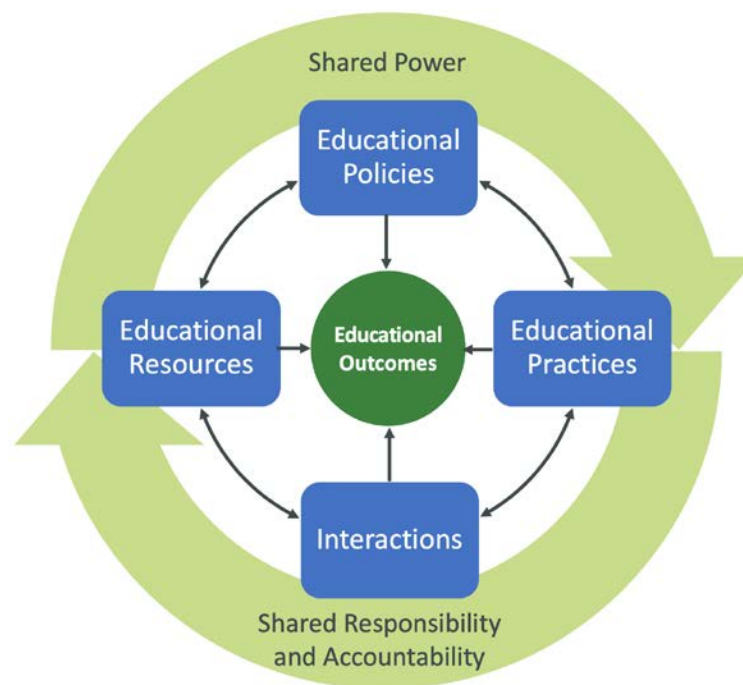
When educational policies, practices, interactions, and resources are representative of, constructed by, and responsive to all people such that each individual has access to, can meaningfully participate, and make progress in high-quality learning experiences that empowers them towards self-determination and reduces disparities in outcomes regardless of individual characteristics and cultural identities.

This definition of equity states clearly *what* must be addressed, *who* should be impacted, and the *results* that should be achieved. It begins with a strong assertion that education policies, practices, interactions, and resources are system inputs that must be addressed in order to advance equity. We define these terms as follows:

- **Educational policies** are the laws, rules, and regulations that govern the operation of education systems at the federal, state, and local levels.
- **Educational practices** are the collection of ethics, principles, approaches, strategies, activities, and tools that educators and others use to deliver education services to students.
- **Interactions** are the interplay and communication that occurs between individuals or groups.
- **Educational resources** include but are not limited to such things as funding, supplies, technology, programs, supports, services, community assets, and partnerships.

Further, all these dimensions are influenced by mindsets, values, relationships, and power dynamics.

Figure 1. System Inputs to Advance Equity



Many definitions of equity are limited to focusing only on what must be changed to achieve equity. However, this narrow focus is insufficient for achieving equity. The definition above includes several other related concepts that are integral to defining and pursuing equity:

- **Power.** All individuals and groups have power, an intrinsic quality that comes from their experiences, funds of knowledge, and culture. However, inequities exist because the ability to exert this inherent power is unevenly distributed: Not all participants in our systems have authority or influence in those systems. Therefore, we will focus in this guide on the importance of sharing **power**—in the form of influence, authority, information, and resources—so that all impacted community members can contribute to, create, and/or change the systems they are part of and can therefore influence the outcomes those systems achieve.
- **Impacted community members.** Equity requires an intentional focus on the needs and outcomes of all individuals and groups who are affected by education policies, practices, and resources. We refer to these individuals and groups as **impacted community members**, and they may include parents, students, and teachers as well as administrators, youth-serving professionals, and community members. To achieve equity, impacted

community members should be represented, engaged, and allowed to make or at least influence decisions.

- **Shared responsibility and accountability.** It is critically important that all impacted community members *share responsibility and accountability* by taking responsibility for promoting equity, being held accountable for achieving equitable outcomes, and maintaining authority or influence over policies and practices. Interactions among all parties should be culturally appropriate and respectful so that all impacted community members can influence the distribution and/or allocation of resources.
- **Equitable outcomes.** Ultimately, equity is achieved only when there are no consistent, predictable negative outcomes, results, experiences, or disadvantages for any individual or group. These include meaningful participation, positive progress, high-quality learning experiences, shared power, and self-determination along with reduced disparities between groups. There are at least four broad areas in which *equitable outcomes* can be measured: access and inclusion, engagement, supports, and resource allocation.
 - » **Access and inclusion:** All individuals and groups feel as if they belong and that they can meaningfully participate in educational programs, including curricular and extra-curricular learning experiences and services. All barriers to participation have been removed, including structural barriers such as policies and processes and relational barriers.
 - » **Engagement:** All individuals and groups feel able to engage; they feel welcome, respected, and sufficiently supported to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Individuals and groups are treated fairly and are safe from violence or threats to their safety and well-being.
 - » **Supports:** All individuals and groups receive the necessary supports to learn and to participate fully in all the educational community's activities.
 - » **Resource allocation:** The equitable allocation of resources based on need is a critical outcome: Without resources, achieving equity in the other areas is not possible.

Similarly, the Great Lakes Equity Center definition above focuses on access, representation, meaningful participation, and high outcomes as critical to centering equity in every step of a continuous improvement process (Anderson et al., 2019; Great Lakes Equity Center, 2013).

Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Health

SEB health is one of many related terms used to describe the range of skills and competencies related to mental health and well-being throughout a person's development. SEB health is more than simply

the absence of psychological problems or diagnoses; it is also the assets, competencies, and mindsets that foster well-being (Moore et al., 2023; Suldo & Romer, 2016).

Like physical health, SEB health and well-being is influenced largely by social determinants that affect the development of students and their families (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014). Examples of social determinants include social inclusion, exposure to trauma, access to community-based services, job security, and food and housing stability (Center for Health and Health Care in Schools et al., 2020; Hacker & Houry, 2022). These social determinants have long been unequally distributed through educational and other policies, practices, relationships, and resources. Historically underserved students tend to receive the fewest resources and experience fewer of the conditions that promote well-being and SEB development than do their more privileged peers (Jon-Ubabuco & Dimmitt Champion, 2019; Spencer, 2018). Historically underserved students also experience the highest levels of stress and trauma, including school-based trauma (Stratford et al., 2020). These students unjustly experience cultural mismatch, discrimination, microaggressions, implicit and explicit biases, and harmful school environments (Edyburn et al., 2022; Jagers et al., 2019). Further, those who could benefit most from SEB supports and services are less likely to be referred; more likely to be excluded and/or misdiagnosed; and less likely to receive quality, culturally responsive care (Marrast et al., 2016; OSG, 2021).

Key features of equity-focused SEB health and well-being initiatives include

- nurturing strengths and addressing the impact of stressors among individuals, groups, and communities;
- dismantling systemic inequities and structural forms of oppression;
- ensuring all students with SEB needs have access to high-quality, culturally responsive services; and
- promoting positive mental health outcomes for underserved students (Edyburn et al., 2022; Lazarus et al., 2021; Malone et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2023; OSG, 2021).

Systems Change

Systems change is a complex process of continuous improvement that involves changing actions and behaviors as well as the “hearts and minds” of each partner (e.g., educators, administrators, community members, families, etc.) in an ongoing way (Blase et al., 2014). Leading systems change involves not only overcoming *technical* challenges related to the processes and practices of implementing new practices and policies but also using strategies specifically designed for addressing *adaptive* challenges that result from peoples’ values, beliefs, mindsets, and ways of working (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz et al., 2009). Advancing equity requires changing deeply held beliefs and assumptions and moving

beyond technical and structural changes related to practices, policies, and resources to the relational, including who has the decision-making power (Kania et al., 2018).

Centering equity in systems change honors individual, family, and community identities, values, histories, and aspirations (McCall et al., 2022) by focusing on *who* sets the vision, identifies the outcomes, allocates resources, establishes policies, and ultimately evaluates the success of the system. Redesigning systems to be more equitable requires an ongoing commitment to examining the personal and organizational beliefs, culture, and practices of the leadership teams making decisions. This work prioritizes relationships and takes time, trust, and a personal investment (Bowman et al., 2021; Radd et al., 2021).

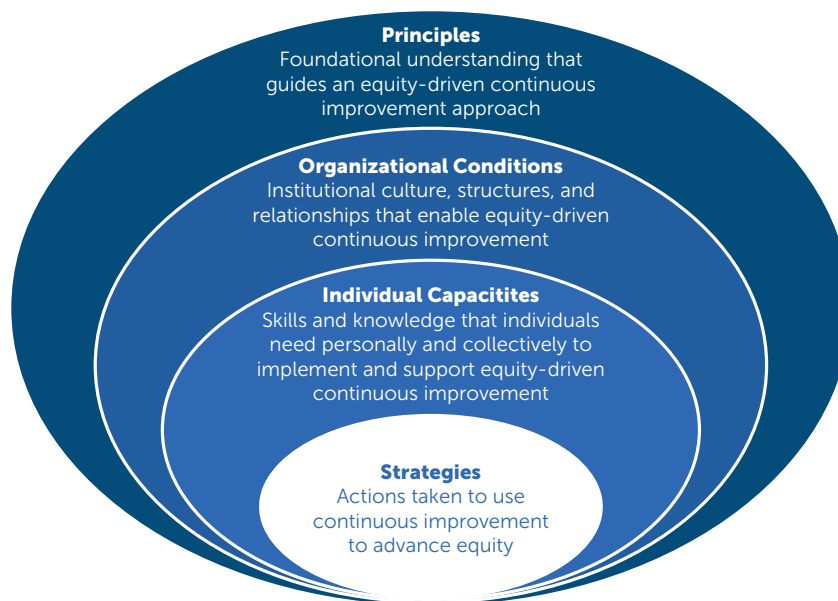
Leadership teams that oversee the implementation of whole person and SEB initiatives are in a position to influence how social determinants are addressed at the systems level and, in so doing, to dismantle the systemic inequities that negatively impact the SEB health and well-being of underserved students.

Data-Based Decision-Making and Data-Using Culture

Data-based decision-making (DBDM) is a process that involves collecting relevant and valid qualitative and quantitative data in order to make informed decisions. DBDM is intended to help teams understand the root causes of what is working (and what is not) in order to identify appropriate solutions that have a high probability of success. For example, a team might investigate why some students have significantly higher ratings on a measure of belonging and whether this is true across subgroups of students. While the team investigates differences across groups, they gather information directly from students.

The DBDM process is based on the scientific method and begins with clearly defining a goal (e.g., Bergan & Kratochwill, 1990). As proposed solutions are implemented, data are collected to monitor the effectiveness of those solutions, which informs continuous improvement toward the specific goal or target. The DBDM process is affected by individual capacities such as mindsets and biases, which are in turn influenced by organizational conditions. Moreover, as depicted in Figure 2, both individual capacities and organizational conditions rely on a shared foundational understanding of equity-driven continuous improvement (Bowman et al., 2021; Valdez et al., 2020).

Figure 2. Key Components of Equity-Driven Continuous Improvement



Note. Replicated with permission from Bowman et al., 2021.

Leadership teams striving to center equity in their DBDM processes commit to reflecting upon how their systems, practices, data, relationships, and personal biases have affected their decisions and perhaps perpetuated inequities. Each of us hold biases of some kind (implicit and/or explicit), which may be based upon our family background, messaging in media, friends, or other sources. These automatic associations are normal, yet all may impact other individuals and groups that we encounter. In the process of reflecting upon their own biases and those embedded in the system, leadership teams together share responsibility for removing systemic barriers, healing using a strengths-based approach, and prioritizing the voices of those most impacted by the decision-making process.

We refer to a **data-using culture** as the collective behaviors and beliefs of people who value, practice, and encourage the use of data to inform decisions. DBDM structures and procedures for identifying, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting data are influenced by a school or district's data-using culture.

DBDM is influenced by how individuals use data to make decisions; the human interactions and relationships influencing those decisions; and the emotions, beliefs, and biases operating at the individual, interpersonal, and systems levels. A data-using culture establishes conditions for human interactions (such as creating a brave space for vulnerability) that undergird equity in the DBDM process.

In a data-using culture that centers equity, leadership teams and the school communities they serve ask questions, challenge ideas and assumptions, and use high-quality data to make decisions with minimal biases. The teams and communities in data-using cultures also use data to quantify inequities such as opportunity gaps, disproportionality in discipline, and disparities in SEB and other related outcomes (McIntosh et al., 2014; McIntosh et al., 2018).

Critically, those in a data-using culture follow ethical principles to promote the appropriate use of data to make decisions (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2017; National Association of School Psychologists, 2020), including the following (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979):

- **Beneficence:** the commitment to maximize benefits and avoid causing harm to the extent possible, even if it is not a formal or legal requirement
- **Respect for persons:** the responsibility to uphold people's power to make decisions that are in their best interest and to protect people who are prevented from exerting that power
- **Justice:** the commitment to the fair distribution of burdens and benefits among people



Part 2: Questions and Recommendations for Centering Equity in Decision-Making

This section of the guide is organized around four interconnected questions that leadership teams can use to explore aspects of creating a data-using culture that centers equity. For each question, we review key considerations that may inform the development of practical strategies. In the Guides section, we offer a dialogue guide for each key question that can help your team engage with these concepts, as well as additional resources and references you may choose to explore.

The four key questions are as follows:

1. What are we measuring and why?
2. Who decides what data we need and from whom?
3. How do we analyze our data?
4. How do we use our data to make decisions?

We suggest that, prior to engaging in the four questions, you convene your team to establish some foundational definitions, assumptions, commitments, and norms, using our [Guide to Getting Started: Defining Equity and Your Data-Using Culture](#) on page 19.

Key Question 1: What are we measuring and why?

Leadership teams use a variety of outcome and implementation data to inform decisions, but there are opportunities to more effectively center equity in the selection of these data. While ecological and multimethod, multisource, multisetting approaches are considered best practice in assessment (Whitcomb, 2017), school-based leadership teams often focus on examining a narrower set of readily accessible outcome data, such as attendance, academic performance, and discipline. Moreover, rather than focusing on the systemic structures and environmental variables (systems, policies, and practices) that perpetuate problems and disparities (Moore et al., 2023), leadership teams often review data using a deficit-based approach to identify students who may be at risk (Davis et al., 2018; Fergus, 2017). For example, a team reviews data and begins to describe the family life of the students who are demonstrating risk and ascribes the outcomes to their socioeconomic status. Such an approach provides little to no information about the preferences, values, strengths, assets, and resources to frame decisions within a strengths-based, ecological, culturally responsive and sustaining lens. Centering equity in decision-making requires data that reflect the aspirations, experiences, and values of the school community

and promotive factors associated with well-being, in addition to data that may indicate early signs of problems. Finally, as leaders in education and other youth-serving systems work together to prevent or address the complex challenges impacting students and their families, these teams may also access community data (e.g., access to health care, green space, aftercare and out-of-school activities, community safety, etc.).

Making decisions about the SEB health and well-being of a school community requires access to valid data that can help answer questions such as the following:

- What are the strengths and aspirations of our students and families?
- What are the gaps and needs?
- How are we codesigning and coevaluating intervention implementation in partnership with students and parents?
- To what extent are we currently implementing culturally responsive and sustainable support and interventions? What are we measuring beyond adherence to a protocol?
- Are practices and programs having the intended impact within a realistic time frame?
- Are practices and programs relevant to and valued by students and their families?
- How are we leading both structural and adaptive change to create systems that are more equitable?

Centering equity in DBDM involves teams collecting and analyzing a wide range of both quantitative and qualitative data, including perception and anecdotal information from multiple sources (e.g., academic measures, climate surveys, community partner interviews, office discipline referrals). By seeking to analyze multiple sources of data, teams strive to ensure their hypotheses are comprehensive and inclusive of multiple perspectives (e.g., students, family, educators, community partners). This process should include collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative outcomes as well as contextual data that can together help identify inequities, determine root causes of those inequities, and generate equitable solutions for all students and adults. Leadership teams can also use strengths-based and ecological approaches to assessment that capture diverse perspectives and focus on malleable factors within the school community and learning environment. Effective teams recognize the limitations in their data and in how they use data, including the potential for bias and causing harm. To improve this further, they can also seek input from impacted community members on the selection and use of measures and take into consideration the technical adequacy, contextual appropriateness, and usability and feasibility of those data (Moore et al., 2023; Romer et al., 2020).

Teams may wish to consider the following types of data:

- **resource indicators:** data that help to explain the allocation/distribution and use of resources (e.g., funding, staffing, etc.) in school and in the community
- **school community voice:** qualitative and quantitative data from surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations to better understand the school community, especially those groups that have been historically underserved
- **community-based indicators:** outcome and other data related to community-based services, childcare and after-school programs, housing, green space, safety, health, and other risk and protective factors that influence education outcomes
- **implementation data:** data that reflect different aspects of implementation (e.g., adherence, adaptation/codesign, dosage, quality) to evaluate whether interventions are being implemented; who has access to them; and how the programs, practices, and systems are being delivered and sustained
- **school-based indicators:** outcome and other related data to academics, attendance, discipline, SEB well-being, climate, and culture

As a team, review the companion [Dialogue Guide for Key Question 1: What are we measuring and why?](#) on page 22.

Key Question 2: Who decides what data we need and from whom?

In schools, teams that meet to review data, make decisions about interventions and supports for students, and develop action plans should include members with a broad range of roles and expertise and represent the perspectives of the school community (Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center Leadership Team, 2020; Hyson et al., 2020). For example, teams might include a school administrator; young people; family members who are not paid employees of the school district but are compensated for their expertise and time; relevant or impacted community members; teachers; an instructional coach or coordinator; mental health and behavior support specialists (e.g., school psychologists, social workers); and diversity, equity, and inclusion specialists (Moore et al., 2023; Splett et al., 2017). Collectively, the team's expertise should include a range of lived experience and understanding of the school community; curricula and instruction across content areas; SEB assessment, supports, services, and systems; data use and systems; and responsibility for adhering to professional ethical guidelines and legal considerations.

Assembling a well-rounded team is an important way to ensure that data reviews and analysis are valid and procedurally sound and that they consider multiple voices when planning and prioritizing what is best for students and families—and when centering and elevating the voices of those who have historically been excluded. The questions and insights of community members can inform every step of the DBDM process from data collection to data use.

Beyond the composition of the leadership team, teams also need to reach out regularly and intentionally to impacted community members, especially students and families. To do this, schools may conduct listening sessions, administer surveys, or use other means, such as having school staff or partners with existing relationships with students and families reach out to those groups. The first step in this process may be identifying who has the developed relationships and why and how these can be cultivated across the team. Home–school communication should be ongoing, utilizing numerous approaches, and is the responsibility of the school.

With this input and participation, leadership teams can then address how to build their own capacity for authentic, representative, bidirectional communication throughout the DBDM process. As with any initiative, this requires resources that may include stipends for family time, childcare, interpreters, meetings held outside of school hours, meetings held in community sites outside of school buildings, and attention to relationship building. Bidirectional communication relies on trust and the capacity to listen and thus takes time.

As a team, review the companion [Dialogue Guide for Key Question 2: Who decides what data we need and from whom?](#) on page 30.

Key Question 3: How do we analyze our data?

In centering equity in DBDM, it is important that teams establish operating procedures that are informed by all members of the team and by the impacted community. Teams need to consider defining roles and responsibilities among team members—including a team leader, a meeting facilitator, a timekeeper, a data manager, and so forth. Teams should also ensure that all meeting documents reflect a data-using culture that centers equity, including the agenda, ongoing meeting minutes, and a written action plan that are all informed by and reflective of the impacted community. For example, structured agendas should focus on establishing clear goals and on developing strengths-based solutions with specific plans informed by those who will be impacted. Some meeting procedures and structures may be unfamiliar or even be perceived as inauthentic to students, family, and community members, so taking

time to be thoughtful in codesigning meetings with the community can help remove these barriers to meaningful participation. The diverse and multiple perspectives and lived experiences across identities and intersecting identities should be evident in all aspects of the meeting.

To ensure that equity is infused in the data-using culture and way of working for teams, leaders and coaches develop a plan for professional learning and ongoing coaching. This professional learning plan includes supporting the leadership team's understanding of individual and systemic bias, culture, and stigma and illuminating how these may impact decision-making and strategies to center equity in DBDM (Fergus, 2017; Payno-Simmons, 2021).

While there are common approaches to DBDM used by effective and efficient teams (Horner et al., 2018; Hyson et al., 2020; Todd et al., 2013), it is still possible that a team may unintentionally make decisions that are not equitable or inclusive. For instance, a team reviews data and determines that 5th grade students are having difficulty in mathematics. Since the data are not disaggregated, the proposed action steps to deliver specific math-based interventions may overlook students who receive English as a second language (ESL) supports and whose scores are on track and, therefore, would not benefit from this intervention. As such, it is critical to access data that can detect disproportionality.

Often, typical data team meetings fail to calculate the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of specific marginalized or minoritized groups (Fergus, 2017). However, such information is crucial in determining whether groups of students experience the educational environment in the same manner as their peers. Disaggregating all data by groups, such as race/ethnicity, gender, and disability status, will support teams in embedding equity into DBDM and throughout systems-level conversations. Further, teams will need to learn how to identify vulnerable decision points and how to create neutralizing routines or strategies that slow down snap decision-making (McIntosh et al., 2018; Smolkowski et al., 2016).

As a team, review the companion [Dialogue Guide for Key Question 3: How do we analyze our data?](#) on page 33.

Key Question 4: How do we use our data to make decisions?

Ideally, data-informed decisions should create equitable conditions for learning and well-being. Regardless of the specific method, DBDM is meant to be a continuous quality improvement process, driven by data and leveraged to improve and result in equitable outcomes for all students. For example, approaches include plan-do-study-act cycles, strengths-based inquiry processes, and multistep

problem-solving, such as Team Initiated Problem-Solving (TIPS; Todd et al., 2013), among others. Leaders can provide guidance and training to their teams on the specific decision-making method they wish to be used within their schools.

For the purpose of this guide, we will describe four essential elements that can together lead to equitable decision-making, along with examples in fictitious schools that illustrate teams that have (a) a multi-step decision-making process; (b) clearly defined and valued goals; (c) a codesigned process; and (d) a strengths-based, ethically sound process and data. These four elements can help teams to create a process that focuses on *needs-fulfilling* (Hyson et al., 2020), in which data create a story the team can review and act upon toward a productive conclusion rather than focusing on *problem-solving*, which can lead to problem admiration and to downward-spiral conversations that often result in apathy or lost time.

Essential Element #1: Multistep Decision-Making Process

- Multistep decision-making requires a commitment to equity, including access, opportunity, inclusion, treatments, supports, and resource distribution.
- Multistep decision-making includes continuous self-reflection for each member of the group in order to discern biases and to attend to the way mindsets and beliefs may influence their decision-making.
- Multistep decision-making should include quantitative and qualitative data gathered from multiple sources using multiple methods and measures that are identified and/or defined with input from all impacted community members.

Example of Multistep Decision-Making Process

Hoover Middle School has been meeting regularly. Team members often find that they run out of time to engage in solutions-focused dialogue after spending most of the meeting discussing students individually and admiring the problems. This year, following a professional learning experience, Hoover Middle School has selected the TIPS process as their method of analyzing data. This includes a specific role in their meetings for one team member to ask equity-centered questions of the team at each level of the process (*precise problem statement, goal/timeline, solution/actions, fidelity, outcome*) prior to making any decisions. With a structured agenda and focus on data, the dialogue now seems more purposeful and directed toward feasible action.

Essential Element #2: Clearly Defined and Valued Goals

- The team has developed clear, measurable goals in collaboration with the students, families, educators, and communities that are valued by those impacted community members. (See also *Essential Element #3: Codesigned Process* below.)
- The team has established a shared understanding of and agreement about equity and of how individual, collective, and systemic bias, culture, and power influence decisions.

Example of Clearly Defined and Valued Goals

Martin Luther King High School has included family members and community organizations as part of their team from the very beginning. When the team was initially established, the team engaged in a participatory process to cocreate a mission, vision, and goals alongside students, families, and community partners. With vision-driven goals in mind, the team keeps the desired outcome—for every student to thrive—at the center of all decision-making. As a result, the goal is intentionally placed at the top of each meeting agenda and at the end of the agenda alongside a relevant question for the team: Have we aligned with our values and goals throughout this meeting? The valued goals serve as a reminder of the team’s purpose and anchor for their work.

Essential Element #3: Codesigned Process

- The team engages impacted community members who are most affected by the team’s decisions and systems (including policies, programs, procedures, and practices).
- The team welcomes all impacted community members to engage fully and meaningfully at every stage of the decision-making process.
- The team shares information and resources with impacted community members and those who are most affected by the decisions and systems and compensates them as appropriate.

Example of Codesigned Process

Cesar Chavez Elementary School has ideas for a schoolwide acknowledgment system. Team members are divided in their preference for what observable behavior will serve as criteria to access the acknowledgment. The team decides to codesign a plan with students and others in the school community that allows for disagreement and discussion and that centers voices who may typically remain quiet, including those of historically marginalized students. Additionally, the team includes consistent quarterly review of the plan in partnership with those centered voices to evaluate not only how the acknowledgment system is working but also whether there has been sufficient involvement from partners impacted by the decisions of the team.

Essential Element #4: Strengths-Based, Ethically Sound Process and Data

- The team focuses on the assets of students, families, and communities and how those assets may be centered throughout the decision-making process.
- The team adheres to ethical and legal guidelines and standards for using data to make decisions.

Example of Strengths-Based, Ethically Sound Process and Data

Edison Middle School has reviewed their data and are noticing that 6th grade boys with Individualized Education Plans are receiving a disproportionate number of office discipline referrals on the playground. The team begins to hypothesize potential reasons for the referrals. Instead of assuming the boys are “frequent fliers” and engaging in conversations that spiral downward into blame or speculation, the team begins to examine the boys’ common interests and where they are successful in school. This allows the team to introduce innovative approaches, including new activities during playground time that may be more interesting to the boys and less likely to foster behavioral incidents.

As a team, review the companion [Dialogue Guide for Key Question 4: How do we use our data to make decisions?](#) on page 36.

Conclusion

At this particular moment in time—when we are navigating the ongoing effects of a global pandemic, a mental health crisis for young people, unprecedented teacher shortages, and racial injustice—it is a moral imperative to center equity in our DBDM around schoolwide whole-person efforts.

The practice of centering equity in DBDM requires intentional changes in the way that school, district, and state education teams operate and collaborate. Throughout this guide, there are multiple steps and considerations to ensure that the teams engaging in an equity-centered DBDM process can discuss, analyze, and create action plans in a way that proactively and immediately responds to data demonstrating *systems-level* deficits. The ultimate goal of this work is to uncover why the *system itself* is failing in order to create conditions in which all students, families, and communities can thrive—especially those who have not historically done so.

In addition, there is always room for improvement and ways to innovate and evolve structures and processes so that they meet the needs of each individual served. This ongoing improvement requires team members to take inventory of their own functions willingly and regularly and to consider whether their decisions are applicable and available to every student. Whether through revisiting an understanding of power, equity, and shared ownership or through continuously asking questions to evaluate our mind-sets while engaging in data analysis, these practices are vital to truly bettering environments for every learner. If we choose to maintain our status quo, the likelihood of seeing any seismic shift in our systems will remain low.

We hope that teams engage with this guidance and with the supporting dialogue guides that follow so that they move beyond talking points and toward real action. Collectively, our nation's state, district, and school teams are ideally situated to facilitate transformational systems change that achieves equitable outcomes and that honors the dignity of our communities and colleagues (Hicks, 2018), particularly those who have been systemically underserved and whose inherent worth is just as important as our own.





Guide to Getting Started: Defining Equity and Your Data-Using Culture

As you begin the process of centering equity in your DBDM, your team may wish to establish some foundational definitions, assumptions, commitments, and norms. The following questions are intended for your team to reflect on how you have defined equity, how committed you are to an equity-focused approach, whether your data-using culture centers equity in decision-making, and how you will ensure that multiple and diverse perspectives and lived experiences are included and/or considered given your own identities and positionality (race, gender, disability, etc.).

No matter where your team and school community are in this process, these conversations may feel difficult. As such, we suggest inviting an experienced facilitator, possibly someone external, to guide the conversation. Even if your team is self-facilitating, these tips may be helpful:

- Begin by cocreating agreements for how each team member will engage in the conversation. These may include the following:
 - » Listen to understand, not to debate.
 - » Lean into discomfort. That is how we grow.
 - » All experiences and perspectives are valid and welcome.
 - » It is okay to disagree. When you do, do so respectfully.
 - » Take space and make space. Monitor how much you contribute to the conversation to ensure that all voices are heard.
 - » Listen to your body. Take a break if and when you need one.
- Set clear goals for the meeting, and explicitly identify milestones toward achieving those goals.
- Include opportunities for team members to get to know each other, strengthen relationships, and build trust.
- Provide ongoing support to students and parents before, during, and after the meeting.
- Make note-taking visible by using chart paper; share a summary of the notes after the meeting.
- Allow participants to lead the conversation and balance that with assertive guidance in order to keep the work on track.
- Intentionally monitor how power is used and shifts during meetings and data discussions. Is there a balance? What voices are privileged? What voices are marginalized?



Step 1. Consider the reflection questions below. For each question, begin with an open, honest discussion of the team’s reflections on the question. Then, consider the key takeaways from the discussion and add any action steps that may result, considering how this affects your definition of equity and how it might affect your team’s practices and data-using culture.

1. How are we defining equity in our work?
 - a. Whose input is privileged?
 - b. Whose input is excluded/not included?
2. How is equity tied to our vision/mission for supporting the whole person?
 - a. Who has informed this definition?



b. How might we commit to ongoing equity-focused professional learning?

3. How does our data-using culture center equity?

a. What barriers are we aware of?

Action Plan: Prioritize the action items that have emerged from these discussions and add them to your organization's existing action plan, or create a new one.



Dialogue Guide for Key Question 1: What are we measuring and why?

Step 1. Fill out the charts below together with your team. In the data type row, list types of data your team is currently collecting and using to make decisions within these categories:

- **resource indicators:** data that help to explain the allocation/distribution and use of resources (e.g., funding, staffing, etc.) in school and in the community
- **school community voice:** qualitative and quantitative data from surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations to better understand the school community, especially those groups that have been historically underserved
- **community-based indicators:** outcome and other data related to community-based services, childcare and after-school programs, housing, green space, violence, health, and other risk and protective factors that influence education outcomes
- **implementation data:** data that reflect different aspects of implementation (e.g., adherence, adaptation/codesign, dosage, quality) to evaluate whether interventions are being implemented; who has access to them; and how the programs, practices, and systems are being delivered and sustained
- **school-based indicators:** outcome and other related data to academics, attendance, discipline, SEB well-being, climate, and culture

Initially, you may want to focus your inquiry on just one, two, or three of the most common types of data your team is using within each category. Then, for each data type, complete the table by considering the questions that each type of data helps to answer, the risks of using these data, whether students and families value these data, whether the data are valid for different student groups, and whether the data inform how you distribute resources and supports.



Resource Indicators

Answer the questions below for each data type	Data Type 1:	Data Type 2:	Data Type 3:
What questions do these data help answer?			
What are the risks of using these data, and who is at risk?			
Do students and families value these data (i.e., do they support the use of these data)? How do you know?			
Are these data valid for the different groups of students you serve?			
Do these data inform how we distribute resources and supports in ways that are meaningful and decrease disparities?			



School Community Voice

Answer the questions below for each data type	Data Type 1:	Data Type 2:	Data Type 3:
What questions do these data help answer?			
What are the risks of using these data, and who is at risk?			
Do students and families value these data (i.e., do they support the use of these data)? How do you know?			
Are these data valid for the different groups of students you serve?			
Do these data inform how we distribute resources and supports in ways that are meaningful and decrease disparities?			



Community-Based Indicators

Answer the questions below for each data type	Data Type 1:	Data Type 2:	Data Type 3:
What questions do these data help answer?			
What are the risks of using these data, and who is at risk?			
Do students and families value these data (i.e., do they support the use of these data)? How do you know?			
Are these data valid for the different groups of students you serve?			
Do these data inform how we distribute resources and supports in ways that are meaningful and decrease disparities?			



Implementation Data

Answer the questions below for each data type	Data Type 1:	Data Type 2:	Data Type 3:
What questions do these data help answer?			
What are the risks of using these data, and who is at risk?			
Do students and families value these data (i.e., do they support the use of these data)? How do you know?			
Are these data valid for the different groups of students you serve?			
Do these data inform how we distribute resources and supports in ways that are meaningful and decrease disparities?			



School-Based Indicators

Answer the questions below for each data type	Data Type 1:	Data Type 2:	Data Type 3:
What questions do these data help answer?			
What are the risks of using these data, and who is at risk?			
Do students and families value these data (i.e., do they support the use of these data)? How do you know?			
Are these data valid for the different groups of students you serve?			
Do these data inform how we distribute resources and supports in ways that are meaningful and decrease disparities?			



Step 2. As a team, consider the following questions and identify the data or information that you have available to inform a response.

1. How do we consider our biases when gathering and reviewing the data?

2. What are the strengths and aspirations of our students and families? What data inform this response?

3. What are the gaps/needs of our students and families? What data inform this response?

4. How are we balancing fidelity with adaptation for our learning community? That is, to what extent are we currently implementing culturally responsive and sustainable support and interventions as designed? What are we measuring beyond adherence to a protocol?
 - a. Are practices and programs relevant to and valued by students and their families?



b. How are we codesigning and coevaluating intervention implementation in partnership with our learning community?

5. Are practices and programs having the intended impact?

6. How are we leading both technical and adaptive change to create equitable systems?

Step 3. Summarize and develop action steps that result from the conversation. Consider the following:

- Which data types are we using the most frequently or most effectively to center equity?
- Are there gaps in the data we are collecting?

Action Plan: Prioritize the action items that have emerged from these discussions and add them to your action plan.



Dialogue Guide for Key Question 2: Who decides what data we need and from whom?

Step 1. The following reflection questions may help you examine the composition of your DBDM leadership team and the roles these team members play as a way to help your team consider who makes decisions regarding data use.

1. Who on our team and within the school community...
...identifies what data we use to inform our decisions?

...determines how we gather data?

...determines how we use data?

...chooses how and with whom we share data?



2. Whose expertise, voices, perspectives, or experiences are missing from these conversations?
 - a. What impact does that have on the decisions we make?
 - b. Who benefits from the perspectives of the team? Who does not?

3. How do we encourage and support the codesign of our DBDM processes?
 - a. What training or support do we provide for effective collaboration?
 - b. How have we structured our meetings to support equitable participation? (Consider meeting times, meeting structure, etc.)



c. Does the culture of our team invite all members to share their perspectives or insights?

4. How are we building and sustaining relational trust? With which groups have we developed such trust?

a. What are our outreach strategies for connecting with young people, families, and their communities?

b. What routines allow for young people, families, and communities to hear from school and district leaders and to share their ideas with us?

c. How have we demonstrated our trustworthiness?

Action Plan: Prioritize the action items that have emerged from these discussions and add them to your action plan.

Dialogue Guide for Key Question 3: How do we analyze our data?

Step 1. The table below describes actions that your team can take before, during, and after meetings to embed equity more deeply into your team’s data analysis routines and practices. Your team could crosswalk these actions with other equity constructs provided in this guide (see Figure 1 from earlier in the report) or with the definition used within your school community to determine areas of alignment (and areas for possible improvement). Alternatively, each member of the team could review the table using the following guiding questions and come to a team meeting prepared to discuss the following questions:

1. Which items in the table stand out to you?
2. What actions and processes do we already have in place?
3. How are these actions and processes helping us center equity?
4. What possible actions and processes are we not implementing currently?
5. Of these possible actions and processes, which might best help us center equity?
Which are most feasible to implement?

Before meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Codesign meeting agenda and data reports and invite additional impacted community members to the table as needed • Ensure agenda aligns with goals to support equity in student mental health and wellness • Provide onboarding and ongoing support to ensure that multiple and diverse student and family members engage fully and lead team activities • Collect valid, representative data aligned with valued goals, social determinants of health (community data), and strengths and assets • Share valid representative data with all impacted community members • Provide ample opportunity to ask questions and reflect on data
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<p>During meetings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set agreements/norms for meetings that create conditions for meaningful and equitable engagement • Consistently invite multiple and diverse perspectives, including family, student, and community voices to ensure that family, student, and community participants feel comfortable and prepared to contribute (with additional prompts as needed) • Make collaborative data-based decisions that are informed by multiple data sources, methods, and measures, which can identify and illuminate strengths, priorities, and resources, as well as needs, perspectives, and barriers • Consider data across the continuum of supports and services with a focus on systemic change and a Tier 1 culturally responsive and sustaining foundation (i.e., root cause analysis of strengths) • Focus on systemic root causes perpetuating inequities • Contextualize data in the lived experiences of impacted community members • Align resources toward meeting identified needs • Create, time, space, support, and accountability for staff to consider how their own beliefs, words, and actions influence their decision-making • Look for strengths, assets, and resources • Examine the systems that maintain privilege • Codesign measurable goals and strengths-based interventions that affirm identities and values (and that repair harm when needed) • Codesign supports for implementers
<p>After meetings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting notes clearly capture how equity informed the team's decisions (e.g., data disaggregation; culture, values, and experiences; strengths-based approaches specific to the focus population) • Seek input from voices not represented in the meeting • Share data widely, clearly, and transparently • Establish and maintain ongoing bidirectional communication with all facets of the school community • Build ongoing relationships within and between home, school, and community members



Foundational across all three phases:

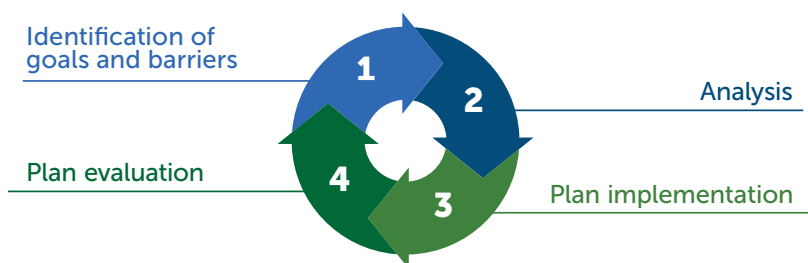
- Commitment to Equity That Is Clearly Communicated by Leadership
- Cycles of Continuous Improvement
- Adaptive and Technical Systems Change
- Ongoing Professional Development, Coaching, and Self-Reflection
- Advocacy for Policies That Advance Equitable Mental Health and Wellness Outcomes

Action Plan: Prioritize the action items that have emerged from your reflections and add them to your action plan.



Dialogue Guide for Key Question 4: How do we use our data to make decisions?

As your team engages in the decision-making process to determine actions that are centered in equity, inclusion, and belonging, they may wish to develop a regular cadence of intentional inquiry. The four-step process and associated questions listed below may help teams to consider their dialogue, inquiry, and eventual decision-making while maintaining a mindset centered on equitable outcomes. Teams may choose to use this guide in many ways, including revisiting these questions periodically, including them in meeting templates and tools, and/or identifying a teammate to pose these questions throughout meetings until consideration of these questions becomes commonplace.



1 IDENTIFICATION OF GOALS AND BARRIERS

- How do we currently assess the learning environment/conditions for learning?
- How do our own values, experiences, training, culture, and theoretical orientation impact how we individually and collectively define goals (i.e., what we want to grow) and barriers (i.e., what hinders our growth)?
- Who is at the table when defining goals and barriers?
- Have we created a safe space for brave conversations, active listening, and learning?
- What data/information are we currently using (multiple sources, methods, and measures) to assess conditions for learning and to identify goals and barriers?
- Do these data inform and relate to our codesigned and shared goals for student mental health and well-being?
- What is the evidence that the data are valid for the students we serve?
- Are our data collection procedures inclusive?
- How have we disaggregated our data?
- How are we centering lived experiences, cultural histories, and community in the data and information we use (or that we avoid) to make decisions?

2

ANALYSIS

- Are the data we are considering tied to the goals and barriers we have identified?
- How are we assessing strengths? How do we avoid deficit thinking?
- What assumptions are we making when interpreting data?
- How do our own values, experiences, training, culture, and theoretical orientation impact how we individually and collectively interpret the data?
- How do we hold ourselves and each other accountable?
- How do we monitor our biases?
- What are the root causes of the systemic barriers that perpetuate inequities? What patterns do we want to shift?
- What do we not understand that is impacting our students?
- What else do we need to know to support the unique strengths, aspirations, and needs of our students?
- What information do we need and from whom do we need it in order to test our hypotheses?

3

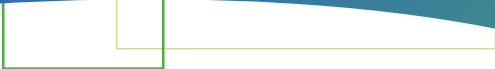
PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

- How do we partner with the impacted community (including students and family members) in developing, selecting, and creating plans?
- Does our plan leverage valued resources and strengths? Does it affirm identities?
- Does our plan address underlying needs?
- Does our plan address the root causes of the systems perpetuating the inequities we are striving to address?

4

PLAN EVALUATION

- How will we measure success?
- How will we share the task of determining success with students, families, and communities?
- When we disaggregate our data, will there be differential effects based on student characteristics? Context (class, grade, etc.)? What indicators can or will we use to measure those effects? What indicators will have differential results?



Note. Questions adapted from Hollins-Sims et al., 2022.

Resources

In addition to the selected resources below, additional information related to the content of this guide can be found at the [Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety's website](#) and the [website of the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports](#).

[*5 Questions Every Team Should Ask About Racial Disproportionality*](#)

[*Addressing Social Influencers of Health and Education Using MTSS*](#)

[*Aligned and Coherent Communications to Serve the Whole Person: A Workbook for Strengthening State Education Agencies' Strategic Communications*](#)

[*Commit to \(Re\)commit: Making Equity Work Personal*](#)

[*Connecting the Brain and Body to Support Equity Work: A Toolkit for Education Leaders*](#)

[*Culturally Responsive Coaching for Inclusive Schools*](#)

[*Culturally Responsive Tiered Fidelity Inventory*](#)

[*Data System Integrity Tool for Equity-Focused Decisions*](#)

[*Discussing Race, Racism, and Important Current Events With Students: A Guide With Lesson Plans and Resources*](#)

[*Forest Park Middle School. Co-Creating an Equitable School Climate With Students. Beyond SEL Audio Gallery*](#)

[*The Fundamentals of Educational Equity*](#)

[*Getting Better at Getting More Equitable*](#)

[*Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates*](#)

[*Integrating Social and Emotional Learning Throughout the School System: A Compendium of Resources for District Leaders*](#)



[Michigan's Multi-Tiered System of Supports Technical Assistance Center's Reframing a Screening Process to Promote Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments That Support Each and Every Learner](#)

[Participatory Systems Change for Equity: An Inquiry Guide for Child-, Youth-, and Family-Serving Agencies](#)

[PBIS Cultural Responsiveness Field Guide: Resources for Trainers and Coaches](#)

[Reimagining School Safety](#)

[Rooting Social and Emotional Well-Being Efforts in Equity: A Reflection Guide](#)

[Serving the Whole Person: An Alignment and Coherence Guide for State Education Agencies](#)

[Understanding Social Influencers of Health and Education: A Role for School-Based Health Centers and Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems](#)

[Using Discipline Data within SWPBIS to Identify and Address Disproportionality: A Guide for School Teams](#)

[The Water of Systems Change](#)

[What Are Social and Emotional Learning and Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education — and What Do They Have to Do With Critical Race Theory? A Primer](#)

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