

Georgia's leading  
research and advocacy  
organization for children  
ages zero to five.



# GEEARS

GEORGIA EARLY EDUCATION  
ALLIANCE FOR READY STUDENTS

Digital Edition

Vol. 5

@gears

# 2021-2022 ANNUAL REPORT



[www.gears.org](http://www.gears.org)



# WHO WE ARE

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GEEARS works to inspire and provide leadership for a statewide movement on quality early learning and healthy development for all children ages birth through five. Established in 2010, GEEARS helps business, civic, and government leaders maximize the economic return on the state's investments in early care and learning.

## MISSION

To support high-quality early learning and healthy development for Georgia's youngest children, from birth to five, by championing policies, promoting innovative and evidence-based practices, and building public will.

## VISION

All Georgia students will enter kindergarten prepared to succeed and on a path to read-to-learn by third grade.



# CONTENTS

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Letter from Mindy.....	4
Policy.....	6-7
Advocacy.....	8-10
Research.....	11
Mayor’s Summer Reading Club.....	12
LABB: Leadership Academy for Better Brains.....	13
PAACT: Promise All Atlanta Children Thrive.....	14-15





# LETTER FROM MINDY

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**Dear Friends,**

This year's annual report reflects GEEARS' advocacy journey from 2021 through the end of our fiscal year, July 2022. During the 2021 and 2022 legislative sessions of the Georgia General Assembly, GEEARS collaborated with policymakers and partners to score a significant series of wins for Georgia's youngest children and their families. From securing paid parental leave for state employees to increasing funding for Pre-K to extending pregnancy Medicaid coverage from six months to a full year, I am proud of all that we have accomplished in this time period.

As vaccines and booster shots became available, we continued our advocacy efforts and emerged from isolation by hosting in-person events and making a hybrid return to our office. Nevertheless, the pandemic is part of the new normal in both our lives and our work at GEEARS. When we think about accessibility and affordability of high-quality early education, access to healthcare, economic challenges, equity issues, and more, COVID-19 is now part of that equation.

You will see in this report that our work sometimes focused on the reverberations of COVID. Through our PAACT initiative, we awarded business-sustaining grants to child care programs that faced existential crises due to the pandemic, supported families with child care scholarships to ease the burden of the high cost of child care, and secured Mayor Dickens' support to make a historic investment in Atlanta's youngest children. Our policy and research team surveyed, then focus-grouped, parents and caregivers about how the pandemic affected their child care choices. Our team worked tirelessly to advocate for family-friendly policies and programs to support Georgia's children and families. And, we have continuously worked to highlight the need for sustained, significant federal investments in early education to address the impacts of the pandemic and build a strong system of early care and learning for the future.

But even as the ongoing pandemic drove some of our work, we did not lose sight of other issues that affect Georgia's families with young children. That is why we worked closely with State Representative Katie Dempsey to achieve passage of legislation that supports lead remediation and abatement. The presence of lead in our water faucets, rental properties, and even playground soil is an issue that affects countless children in Georgia, especially those living in poverty. We also lobbied for expanded eligibility and access to Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) and that was a win for Georgia's families.

During this time period, too, we shifted gratefully from all-virtual programming to just *some* virtual events. While Strolling Thunder, the wonderful day of advocacy that connects families with their legislators, remained on Zoom in 2021 and 2022, the Mayor's Summer Reading Club was all about in-person story times and celebrations. And even though the audience at our Mayoral Candidate Forum tuned in virtually, the candidates were together in person, which gave the conversation a unique energy.

GEEARS is nimble. When a crisis hits, such as the historic infant formula shortage of May 2022, we can move quickly with advocacy and action. We listen to our community and collaborate on ideas that have a real and immediate impact on young children and their families, caregivers, and educators.

Now, more than ever, our approach to making Georgia the best place for children to live is relevant and holistic in scope. And whatever Georgia's families with young children face in the year ahead, we will be ready to elevate their voices, share their stories, and advocate on their behalf. We will remain a trusted resource for data, research, and examples of best practices to help policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders make the best decisions possible for our youngest children.

All my best,



**Mindy Binderman**

**Executive Director**

**GEEARS: Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students**







# POLICY

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## State Legislative Wins

Many protective measures for children passed during the 2021 and 2022 legislative sessions. Here is the legislation GEEARS advocated for over the last two years.

### 2021

- [HB 146](#) awarded paid parental leave to nearly to 250,000 state employees.
- [HB 163](#) implemented Express Lane Eligibility (ELE), enabling Georgia to use data from other programs, like SNAP, to identify and enroll eligible children in Medicaid and PeachCare. By making the process more streamlined, ELE is estimated to enroll an additional 60,000-70,000 uninsured children.
- The House and Senate included a \$3.5 million increase for the [Childcare and Parent Services \(CAPS\)](#) program's child care scholarships for working families with low incomes and an additional \$1.7 million for Georgia's Pre-K in their respective versions of the FY2022 budget.

#### Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health (GA-AIMH)

A two-year-long series of conversations, collaborations, and recommendations within the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Committee of GEEARS' Georgia Infant-Toddler Coalition resulted in the 2021 founding of the Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health (GA-AIMH).

Throughout the year, an exploratory board that included GEEARS' Senior Health Policy Manager, Callan Wells, labored to define the vision, mission, values, and goals of GA-AIMH and to find a home for the association at Georgia State University's Mark Chaffin Center for Healthy Development (MCCHD).

The exploratory board has now become the Association's Community Advisory Council and GA-AIMH is up and running, offering training for behavioral health clinicians in Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP).

### 2022

- [HB 1013](#), the Mental Health Parity Act, required insurers to cover mental health services for children, adolescents, and adults. The law also made two additions to the Behavioral Health Coordinating Council—a representative from the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) and an expert on early childhood mental health.
- [SB 338](#) extended pregnancy Medicaid from six months to 12 months. This was a GEEARS-supported recommendation from the 2019 House Study Committee on Infant-Toddler Social Emotional Health.
- [HB 1355](#), the Childhood Lead Exposure Control Act, increased lead testing and remediation access.
- A \$2,000 increase in the base salary of lead and assistant teachers in Georgia's Pre-K program, which is particularly critical for assistant teachers who have been left out of significant increases in years past and made only \$16,190 annually regardless of their experience or education.
- \$3.1 million to increase CCDF state funding (which primarily funds Georgia's CAPS program) to meet the state match and maximize existing federal funds. An additional \$500,000 was included to increase funding specifically for CAPS.



# Federal Legislative Wins

## American Rescue Plan Act

Signed into law in March 2021, the [American Rescue Plan Act](#) provided a historic \$39 billion in dedicated funding for the child care industry. Georgia received \$1.57 billion. This funding came at a critical time for programs, teachers, and families as the COVID-19 pandemic threatened Georgia's child care industry, with many programs reporting reduced revenues, decreased enrollment, and increased overall costs.

GEEARS led a group of 13 stakeholders in submitting shared recommendations to the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) on how they could center equity in the use of ARPA funds. The suggestions included ways to remove barriers to accessing aid and addressing the mental health needs of children and providers by recognizing that certain children and families were disproportionately affected by the stresses brought on by the pandemic.

DECAL has since implemented several initiatives with federal relief funds, including ongoing stabilization grants for child care providers, supplemental bonus payments for early childhood educators, robust stakeholder engagement, and the expansion of Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program, which provides child care scholarships to working families with low incomes.



## Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Expansion

Through federal and state funds, DECAL has expanded access to CAPS by increasing the number of children served by the program by 10,000, raising income limits, and eliminating costs to participating families.

In May 2022, DECAL further expanded CAPS by adding a new priority group for student parents. Helping student parents access child care will also help them complete their postsecondary programs, advance their careers, and improve their family's economic stability.

For years, GEEARS actively advocated for increasing access to child care for student parents, including through our [Opportunities Lost video for higher education](#).

# ADVOCACY

## Working towards Significant, Sustainable Funding for Early Childhood Education

For the first time in over 50 years, there has been meaningful movement towards significant, sustainable federal funding for early childhood education. Over the past year and a half, GEEARS has been a major player in this movement here in Georgia. We've built stronger relationships with Georgia's Congressional Delegation and rallied allies across the state to advocate for this once-in-a-generation opportunity through our [Child Care Can't Wait campaign](https://www.childcarecantwait.org).

Building those connections and sharing the importance of issues impacting young children and their families has resulted in increased awareness among members and their staff.

This has led to members of Georgia's Congressional Delegation publicly supporting several time-sensitive federal issues, such as access to early childhood education, the expanded child tax credit, and paid family and medical leave. That support has taken many forms, including voting in support of legislation, hosting roundtables, issuing press releases, signing 'Dear Colleague' letters, and introducing and/or co-sponsoring related bills.

From January 2021 through June 2022, GEEARS held 56 meetings, site visits, or roundtables with Georgia's Congressional Delegation and their staff. Eighty-one Georgians from across the state, including parents, caregivers, teachers, child care providers, and business stakeholders, engaged in these conversations.



## Strolling Thunder

We believe there are no better advocates for young children than the kids themselves (and their families). GEEARS, in partnership with ZERO TO THREE, has hosted Georgia's Strolling Thunder for the last five years to elevate the needs of Georgia's youngest children. This population must be a statewide priority in order for Georgia to develop stronger families, vibrant communities, and a prosperous state.

Even though Strolling Thunder has looked a bit different in the last two years, GEEARS still found ways to empower nearly 180 families from over 60 cities across the state, with personalized advocacy packages and virtual trainings. Families wrote letters to their state legislators about the joys and challenges of raising young children in Georgia.

GEEARS worked with our partners to make Strolling Thunder accessible for all families. For example, GEEARS partnered with CDF Action to recruit and offer advocacy training in Amharic, Arabic, and Burmese to non-English speaking families with young children.

Following the trainings, GEEARS gave all of Georgia's 236 legislators treats and personalized letters from Strolling Thunder participants as a thank you for their hard work during the legislative session.





# Congressional Meeting Highlights

**May 2021:** Kristen Johnson, a preschool director and mother of two young children from Duluth shared her story about paid family leave with Representative Carolyn Bourdeaux. This virtual meeting was part of the ZERO TO THREE-led day of advocacy, National Strolling Thunder.



**June 2021:** Senator Jon Ossoff held a press conference at Sheltering Arms in Atlanta about the importance of making the expanded child tax credit permanent. GEEARS Executive Director, Mindy Binderman, spoke at the press conference, explaining how the expanded child tax credit eased the financial stress on Georgia families by helping them afford basic necessities.

**November 2021:** Congressman Buddy Carter visited a family-owned child care center, Thrive Early Learning, in Richmond Hill, Georgia. The center's owners started the program because they could not find quality child care in the area for their two young children. Congressman Carter spoke with educators and parents, noting that programs like Thrive support parents' (including members of the military and other essential workers) participation in the workforce. The visit wrapped with Congressman Carter reading *God Bless Our Country* to Thrive's young students in honor of Veterans Week.



**March 2022:** GEEARS hosted a roundtable conversation featuring Congresswoman Nikema Williams at Our House in Atlanta to discuss the economic impact of child care. Congresswoman Williams referred to this visit the following week during the hearing for the bipartisan Care is an Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Act. The CEDS Act, which passed out of the House in April 2022, would require Economic Development Districts to show in their Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies how they will increase access to care-based services, including child care.

**March 2022:** GEEARS hosted a virtual roundtable with Congressman Barry Loudermilk and a parent and child care provider from GA District 11. The parent shared with Congressman Loudermilk their family's struggles affording child care, while the provider detailed challenges facing the child care sector, including recruiting and retaining the workforce.



# Georgia Infant-Toddler Coalition



Since 2018, GEEARS has convened the [Georgia Infant-Toddler Coalition](#) to advance the physical, social, intellectual, and emotional well-being of infants and toddlers across Georgia.

With over 90 individual members from 47 diverse organizations, the coalition works to elevate the needs of children ages zero to three and ensure that they receive the quality care and access to services they need to thrive.

Through collaboration and innovation, the Coalition seeks to build public will, support aligned activities, and mobilize funding to advance policies that address the needs of Georgia's infants and toddlers.

## Facing the Infant Formula Shortage

When a historic infant formula shortage reached a crisis point in May 2022, GEEARS and our partners—including the Georgia Head Start Collaboration Office and the Georgia Department of Public Health, which houses Georgia's WIC program—began collecting stories to better understand the shortage's impact across the state.

In response, Georgia's WIC program changed some of its rules, such as allowing caregivers to purchase a wider variety of formula brands and sizes, without the formerly required doctor's note. Additionally, WIC beneficiaries are now issued multiple vouchers for single cans of formula, whereas before they were often required to purchase in bulk. WIC also instructed county health departments to donate returned formula that was safe to consume. Finally, DPH asked formula manufacturers to prioritize the Georgia rural counties most affected by the shortage.





# RESEARCH

## Navigating Child Care and Employment Choices in the Era of COVID-19

In July 2021, GEEARS commissioned a statewide survey of 400 Georgia parents with children ages zero to four. The survey focused on a range of topics relevant to these unprecedented times. They included child care arrangements and satisfaction levels, general attitudes toward, perceptions of, and preferences for child care, and financial and employment impacts in relation to child care.

The [findings](#) revealed that parents were more likely to report using a home-based child care arrangement than prior to the pandemic. The survey also underscored some of the financial and employment-related challenges families with young children are facing in the wake of the pandemic.

**CHECKING IN:**  
How Georgia's Families  
are Navigating Child Care  
and Employment Impacts  
in the Era of COVID-19

SEPT 2021



**"It Kind of Broke All of Us."**

Navigating Child Care and Employment in the  
Era of COVID-19: Parents and Caregivers Tell  
Their Stories.

JUNE 2022



## “It Kind of Broke All of Us.”

The GEEARS team wanted to learn more, so in the fall of 2021, we commissioned a series of focus groups with parents of young children from across Georgia. In [these caregivers' stories](#), we learned that parents' work lives and employment status continued to be disrupted by the pandemic and that safety was still top of mind for many.

They expressed that they felt left behind by a society that was moving on from the pandemic. This illuminated a more general truth—even in normal times, young children and their families are sometimes forgotten when it comes to policies, budgets, and workplace practices.

## The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Head Start Programs & Families

Head Start and Early Head Start are federal programs that provide comprehensive health, nutrition, education, early intervention, and family support services for children from families with lower incomes.

To find out how families served by these programs were faring during the pandemic, GEEARS and several partners conducted six focus groups with both Head Start parents and family support/health managers.

The [findings](#) from these focus groups were resounding. Head Start served as a lifeline during the pandemic, when families struggled more than before with food insecurity, unemployment and housing loss, and challenges with and/or gaps in their public benefits.

**The Impact of COVID-19 on Head Start  
Programs and Families:**  
Recommendations for Health Care  
Providers and Policymakers



# MAYOR'S SUMMER READING CLUB



GEEARS started the [Mayor's Summer Reading Club \(MSRC\)](#) in 2012 to promote early literacy and bring the Atlanta community together around a love of reading. Ten years later, the MSRC is bigger and stronger than ever.

Every year, we announce a city-wide book choice for infants and, for children ages three to five, commission an original book in partnership with the Alliance Theatre with funding from our long-time partner, PNC Bank. We work with community partners to distribute copies of the books at no cost to children, and we require MSRC Partners to create engaging enrichment activities around the stories to facilitate early literacy.

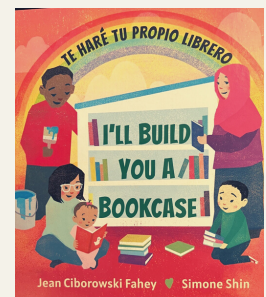
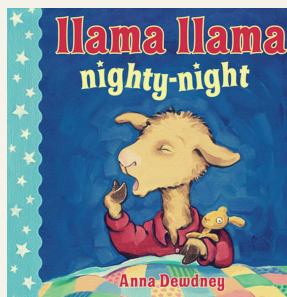
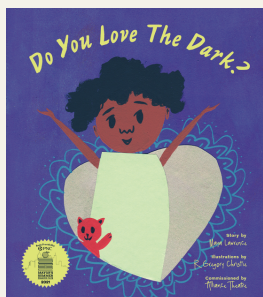
In addition, we emphasize parent skill-building through our partnership with the Rollins Center for Language and Literacy at the Atlanta Speech School and by providing training and materials to help create language-rich experiences anchored by the MSRC books.



MSRC's 2021 events may have been virtual, but they were also numerous! In collaboration with 84 partners throughout the city, the Mayor's Summer Reading Club produced 335 events for young readers and their families and gave away 17,000 books.

In the summer of 2022, the MSRC celebrated its 10th summer of early literacy and partnered with 83 child-serving entities to produce over 200 events and give away 19,520 books.

## Book Selections





# LABB: LEADERSHIP ACADEMY FOR BETTER BRAINS

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## Road to Ready Virtual Bus Tour

In the spring of 2021, GEEARS' [Leadership Academy for Better Brains \(LABB\)](#) hosted its third Early Learning and Healthy Development Bus Tour. We invited health experts, early care and learning providers, policymakers, and other community leaders to join the virtual journey and explore how different parts of Georgia approach early learning and care and address the challenges families with young children face.

With 2021's Bus Tour following an unprecedented public health crisis, the theme of the tour, fittingly, was *Bouncing Back from the Pandemic*. Following a map from Ellijay to Rome, from Gainesville to Athens, participants spent three mid-day seminars covering topics from early learning and mental health to family supports and two-generation approaches. Expert speakers included Dr. Jose Cordero, of University of Georgia, who explained how early development can affect health outcomes; Natalie Towns, who explained DFCS's Preventative Interventions division; and a panel discussion featuring Zero to Three's Myra Jones-Taylor, Georgia representative Sam Park, and GEEARS board chair, Stephanie Blank, who moderated.

The nearly 100 attendees may not have seen many sites on their virtual bus, but the six hours of discussion and enlightenment was a journey, nonetheless.



## Preschool to Third Grade (P-3) Leaders Fellowship

2021 and 2022 were the second and third years of the GEEARS [Preschool to Third Grade \(P-3\) Leaders Fellowship](#). In both years, the fellowship program grew, with 16 fellows graduating in 2021 and 18 in 2022.

The fellowship helps early learning program directors, elementary principals, and district leaders join forces to better understand each other's systems and strategies, creating a seamless transition for children moving on from preschool.

The leaders who join the fellowship come to embrace a paradigm shift—early learning and elementary education are not separate entities but a vibrant continuum. From a child's third month through her third grade, she'll get the best possible start on her educational journey if her teachers, administrators, and caretakers work together.

The 2021 and 2022 fellows completed four intensive trainings and intersession projects over eight months. Graduates emerged with certification, action plans, and a powerful, enduring network of alumni, ready to help their educators teach with more insight and efficiency and help students transition through their earliest years with more security, confidence, and academic readiness.





# PAACT: PROMISE ALL ATLANTA CHILDREN THRIVE

You've likely heard or used the phrase, "Let's make a pact." You may have said it to your kids, a friend, or your neighbor. A pact is a promise, a commitment to something that is important to you. In Atlanta, PAACT is the promise of something big...

[PAACT: Promise All Atlanta Children Thrive.](#)



Led by GEEARS, PAACT is a citywide alliance of public and private partnerships working to improve outcomes for children in the City of Atlanta. The opportunity gap in Atlanta starts early, as families with young children face housing, health care, and child care costs that are increasingly out of reach. Since its inception, PAACT has been committed to ensuring all young children in Atlanta are healthy, learning, and developing so they enter school ready for success, thrive once in school, and are prepared to reach their full potential as residents of our city.

Early childhood education is as much about building our city's future as it is about circle time, storytelling, and playing outdoors. That's why in the summer of 2021, PAACT set out to raise awareness of its mission to all Atlantans: If every child in Atlanta had access to high-quality early care and education, they would have the power to generate tens of millions of dollars in economic activity for the city and chart a path to a more equitable future. In other words, if Atlanta doesn't invest in their education now, we'll pay for it later.

The PAACT collaborative conducted a citywide campaign complete with social media advertisements, internet radio PSAs, Marta bus wraps, and billboards around the city. The advertisements urged one and all to #MakethePAACT to raise awareness about the inequities in early childhood education. The goal was to get people talking about the critical importance of high-quality early learning for Atlanta's babies and children, for their families, and for their communities.

## Mayor Dickens Announced a \$5 Million Investment in Early Education



In April 2022, Mayor Andre Dickens used his first State of the City address to announce a [landmark financial pledge](#). He declared that the City of Atlanta would invest \$5 million in early education. He also urged Atlanta Public Schools to match this commitment and challenged the private sector to contribute \$10 million to support Atlanta's youngest children.

The PAACT collaborative's advocacy and partnership with City leadership played a significant role in accomplishing this win. News of the historic investment made headlines far beyond Atlanta.

And when the first private funders—the Joseph B. Whitehead Foundation and the United Way of Greater Atlanta—stepped forward with a \$4.5 million contribution, it was announced that PAACT would be deploying the funds, along with partners that included Quality Care for Children and the Rollins Center's Literacy and Justice for All initiative.

# PAACT and Partners Support Child Care Providers and Families with Grants and Scholarships

Teaming up with an array of partners, PAACT's Fund for Quality offered two rounds of grants and scholarships to serve a variety of needs in the Atlanta community. The grants supported child care programs in need of facility improvements to increase quality, and the scholarships helped alleviate the cost of child care for families in need.

## Grants for Family Child Care Homes

In July 2021, GEEARS [surveyed 400 parents](#) about their pandemic child care choices and found that 62% said the pandemic made them more likely to consider smaller, home-based care compared to larger group settings. Meanwhile, these home-based child care businesses were facing existential crises due to the pandemic's upheaval.

All these factors compelled PAACT to partner with the Low-Income Investment Fund (LIIF) and the Wells Fargo Foundation to award operations-sustaining grants to 20 family child care homes. Each received funds ranging from \$7,000 to \$18,500. The funds were used to cover costs such as payroll, rent, utilities, and insurance, as well as any materials necessary for meeting the demands of child care in the era of COVID-19.

All eligible child care programs that submitted a complete application and met the criteria were awarded a grant.



## PAACT Fund for Quality

The PAACT Fund for Quality (FFQ) and Early Learning Property Management (ELPM), in consultation with the Reinvestment Fund and Quality Care for Children, offered grants for funds up to \$25,000 to eight Atlanta-based, Quality Rated child care providers (six child care centers and two family child care homes).

The providers used these funds to maintain and improve their facilities with renovations both major and minor.

## PAACT Scholarship Powered by Quality Care for Children's BOOST Program

Access to high-quality child care facilitates success in all aspects of life for children and their families. Yet, for many families, the costs of child care, especially the kind of quality child care that all children deserve, can be a cruel obstacle.

That's why PAACT and Quality Care for Children partnered to give child care scholarships to families who qualified financially. After a straightforward application, grant awardees' child care costs were subsidized commensurate with their income. Families paid no more than 10% of their household earnings on child care, and the PAACT Scholarship Powered by Boost paid for the rest.

This scholarship deployed \$1.3 million in tuition and benefitted 143 infants and young children.



# 10th Anniversary Sponsors



## **Presenting Sponsor (\$10,000)**

Nasarian Foundation

## **Early Education Champions (\$5,000)**

The Liz Blake Giving Fund

## **Toddler Allies (\$2,500)**

BlackRock Financial Management

## **Newborn Proponents (\$1,000)**

Literacy for All/Partners In Change

United Way of Greater Atlanta

Metro Atlanta Chamber

GA Foundation for Early Care & Learning

GA Association for Infant Mental Health

HL Strategy

John & Maria Upchurch Family Foundation

Yolanda Adrean

Jay and Jackie Berkelhamer

Jackie and Jimmy Cushman

Dave Peterson

Cindra Taylor

Kimberly Wright



# BlackRock®

**LITERACY  
FOR ALL.**



United Way of  
Greater Atlanta



HL STRATEGY

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