Bridging the Gap’s Work on Childhood Obesity

Research informing practice and policy for healthy youth behavior

INTRODUCTION

Bridging the Gap: Research Informing Practice and Policy for Healthy Youth Behavior since 2004 has focused on identifying the policy and environmental factors that drive the decisions adolescents make about the food they eat and their level of physical activity. The program examines these factors over long periods of time and across multiple levels: national, state, community, school district, school, and student. In this way, it has been able to bridge the gaps between government policies, school district decisions, on-the-ground practices at schools and in neighborhoods, subsequent student behavior—and ultimately the obesity and health of the students.

Bridging the Gap started in 1997 to identify and analyze how public policies influenced youth decisions about using alcohol, tobacco, and other substances. It began to shift its focus to childhood obesity in 2004. Support from RWJF for this second phase of Bridging the Gap totals about $43.11 million from January 1, 2004 through April 30, 2015.

The program reflects an important evolution in RWJF thinking, explains C. Tracy Orleans, PhD, RWJF senior scientist and Bridging the Gap program officer. “We were first focused on the individual behavior change paradigm—‘If you tell them, they will change.’” she explains. While emerging data showed that kids’ behaviors were, in fact, changing, “no one was monitoring the drivers of changes, the policies that might have prompted those changes.”

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1 This funding includes about 10 percent or $4.3 million for tobacco-focused work according to program Co-Director Frank J. Chaloupka, PhD.
Bridging the Gap is co-directed by Frank J. Chaloupka, PhD, at the University of Illinois at Chicago and Lloyd D. Johnston, PhD, at the University of Michigan. See the Appendix for a list of individuals interviewed for this report, which covers the program’s work on childhood obesity to date.

WHAT IS BRIDGING THE GAP ABOUT?

Bridging the Gap is about helping adolescents make choices that support healthy lifestyles. It does that by exploring questions such as:

- Will raising taxes on soda reduce the amount of soda that adolescents drink? How high does the tax have to be to affect that decision?
- What are the implications of state or school district physical activity policies—during school and after school? How well will districts implement such policies? Will students participate? Which students are more likely to participate?
- Are students who attend schools surrounded by convenience stores or fast food outlets more likely to be overweight than students who attend schools without such access? Are low-income or minority neighborhoods more likely to have these outlets?
- Are the nation’s schools making progress on dimensions of relevance to student weight outcomes, like food and beverage offerings, and opportunities for exercise?

Bridging the Gap relies heavily on the duration and strength of the relationship between co-directors Chaloupka and Johnston. RWJF makes parallel grants to their respective institutions, and a management structure supports the integration of their work. Chaloupka also directs the national program office, called the coordinating center.

From Substance Use to Childhood Obesity

Over a period of 16 years, Bridging the Gap established an impressive track record in conducting high-quality groundbreaking research on substance use, according to a program evaluation, and earned the respect of researchers, policy-makers, federal funding agencies, and other stakeholders. It also built a strong infrastructure and implemented robust systems for gathering, analyzing, and disseminating complex data. See the Program Results Report for details about that work.

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2 Chaloupka is distinguished professor of economics and director of the Health Policy Center at the Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

3 Johnston is distinguished senior research scientist and collegiate research professor at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.
In late 2003, shortly after RWJF shifted its focus to reversing the epidemic of childhood obesity, staff saw an opportunity to apply Bridging the Gap’s infrastructure, systems and senior staff to this issue. “Bridging the Gap is trying to figure out the role of policy and environmental influences on health behavior,” said Chaloupka. “We have evolved in our work from a focus on alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs to eating, exercise, and obesity. But, ultimately the program is about how policies affect behavior.” See the Grantee Story on Chaloupka.

Johnston adds, “It’s a long-term collaborative research and reporting study of American adolescents. We are multilevel, multidisciplinary; we use multiple data sets and involve multiple collaborators. We are unique in having so many ‘multi’ components.” See the Grantee Story on Lloyd Johnston.

**HOW DOES BRIDGING THE GAP WORK?**

*Bridging the Gap* conducts research that establishes links across multiple perspectives and illuminates the factors that have the largest impact on the decisions students make about their diet and physical activity behaviors.

“*Bridging the Gap is the only study in the United States that can assess the effects of policies and environments at the school, community, state, and national levels and link them to self-report measures of diet, physical activity, and BMI (body mass index).*”—RWJF Senior Program Officer/Senior Scientist, Tracy Orleans, PhD

A key feature of the program is that it allows individual student data, school administrator data, community data, and policy data to be combined and matched to show connections. Chaloupka and Johnston’s analyses have pointed to trends over time and identified differences in diet and physical activity behavior—and their key determinants—by grade, race/ethnicity, gender, income level, and other factors.

“We developed ways to connect environmental data with individual data without compromising the confidentiality of the individual students,” said Johnston.

**The Student and School Component**

This component of *Bridging the Gap* builds on the Monitoring the Future survey, an ongoing study of the behaviors, attitudes, and values of American secondary school students, college students, and young adults. The study began in 1975 and is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. About 50,000 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade students participate in the annual survey.
Johnston directs this component at the University of Michigan. Johnston has also directed Monitoring the Future since its inception in 1975.

This component includes:

- **Student Survey**, which asks students participating in the Monitoring the Future study about their diet, exercise, sedentary behaviors, sleep, soda consumption, height and weight, and their attitudes and beliefs in some of these areas.

- **Secondary School Surveys**, which ask some 200 administrators of schools participating in Monitoring the Future—and an additional 600 administrators in schools that are not participating in Monitoring the Future, but that also constitute a nationally representative sample—about their physical education requirements and food and beverage offerings.

### The Community and State Component

In this component, *Bridging the Gap* collects information about neighborhoods around schools and relevant school district, city, state, and federal policies. Chaloupka directs this component at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

This component includes:

- **Food and Fitness Primary School Administrator’s Survey.** About 1,000 public elementary schools participate in this annual survey. Questions cover factors such as walking school bus active transportation (in which children walk to school in a group, supervised by an adult), recess, and the prevalence of sugary foods and beverages at classroom parties.

- **School District Wellness Policies.** Researchers collect and analyze wellness policies used by school districts across the country, focusing especially on restrictions on sales of competitive food and beverages.

> “We found Bridging the Gap’s National School Wellness Policy Study to be the single most comprehensive and informative school wellness policy surveillance system”

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4 This was called the *Youth, Education, and Society*, or YES! component of *Bridging the Gap*, during the substance use phase of the program, but that separate branding is no longer formally used.

5 This was called the *ImpacTeen* component of *Bridging the Gap* during the substance use phase of the program, but that separate branding is no longer formally used.

6 Since the 2006–2007 school year, the federal government has required school districts participating in federal school nutrition programs to adopt and implement wellness policies. *Bridging the Gap* has studied some 600 district policies each year since then.
Community Obesity Measures Project. Researchers visited 150–200 neighborhoods that serve local schools to observe food outlets and physical activity settings and collected information on local laws, regulations, and master plans. (These visits took place in 2010, 2011, and 2012.)

State Policies Targeting Obesity. Researchers collect data on policies in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Areas covered include state sales and other taxes on soft drinks, snack foods, restaurant food; state Safe Routes to School laws; state rules governing comprehensive/master planning; and other relevant policies.

Commercial and Archival Database Analyses. Staff collects and analyzes data on density of food outlets, prices of healthy and unhealthy foods, and the nutritional content of products advertised on children’s television programming, among others.

A Core Commitment to Collaboration

Bridging the Gap collaborates with advocacy and research programs established by RWJF, government officials, and other stakeholders in the field of obesity. In addition to sharing their data and attending meetings of other RWJF programs, program staff seeks input from colleagues as they revise their surveys.

Among other examples of collaborative activities, Bridging the Gap staff:

- Coordinates with Voices for Healthy Kids, an outreach and advocacy initiative established by RWJF in January 2013 to mobilize people across the country to eat healthier foods and be more active. The American Heart Association directs the initiative, which focuses on six “hub areas”—smart school foods, marketing food to youth (called marketing matters), active places, healthy drinks, food access, and active kids out of school.

“Bridging the Gap is uniquely positioned to answer critical policy-relevant research questions for each advocacy hub,” says Jamie Chriqui, PhD, MHS, of the University of Illinois at Chicago. For example, Voices for Healthy Kids expects to use its research on how states tax bottled water and sugar-sweetened beverages and policies related to food marketing in schools.

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7 The quote is from a January 2014 memo from the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition, which reviewed five school wellness policy surveillance systems at RWJF’s request.

8 Chriqui is director of policy surveillance and evaluation for the Health Policy Center at the Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She directs Bridging the Gap’s annual evaluation of school district wellness policies and the annual surveillance of state taxes on sugar and artificially sweetened beverages, snacks, and restaurant sales.
• Shared data and prepared joint papers with researchers at the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University.9 “We interacted a lot around the impact of school nutrition policies, the impact of food advertising on children, and the economics of beverage taxes,” explains Kelly Brownell, PhD, the Rudd Center’s former director, and now dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. “We also communicated regularly to be sure we didn’t duplicate work.”

• Collaborated with Healthy Eating Research,10 an RWJF national program, which gave a grant to Bridging the Gap researcher Lisa Powell, PhD. Powell, who is based at the University of Illinois at Chicago, studied taxes on soft drinks and concluded that despite industry claims, a “new 20 percent sugar-sweetened beverage tax in two states, California and Illinois, would not have any significant impact on employment in those states.”

The researchers published the results in the American Journal of Public Health,11 and worked with RWJF to release a research brief, press release, and several social media messages at the same time to ensure that the study’s findings reached academic, policy, and advocacy audiences.

WHAT HAS BRIDGING THE GAP ACCOMPLISHED ON CHILDHOOD OBESITY?

Providing New Knowledge: Key Research Findings

Through February 2014, Bridging the Gap researchers had produced 147 journal articles, 21 research or policy briefs, and eight monographs or chart books. This includes a special October 2007 supplement to the American Journal of Preventive Medicine focused entirely on Bridging the Gap research, which is available online. See the Research section of the program’s website (www.bridgingthegapresearch.org) for many of the research products.

The program’s obesity-related publications have been cited almost 3,600 times over a decade, according to a September 2013 assessment conducted by the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition and Gutman Research Associates.12 More telling, that report noted

9 For more information on the work of the Rudd Center, read the Progress Report.
10 Healthy Eating Research, based at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, gives grants to individual researchers to study real-world problems, supports issue-based working groups, and leads communications and advocacy efforts to make information useful to policy-makers. See the Progress Report for more details.
12 For the assessment, Courtney Pinard, PhD, research scientist at the Omaha, Neb.-based Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition, conducted 31 interviews with RWJF and Bridging the Gap staff, staff of RWJF obesity programs and other stakeholders. Majorie Gutman, PhD, of Gutman Research Associates in Cranbury, N.J., analyzed program information, such as web usage, publications, and grants/contracts.
that “citation of Bridging the Gap publications has skyrocketed in recent years, with 60 percent of all citations in the last two and one-half years.”

“The quality and richness of Bridging the Gap data was unlike that of any other research entity.”—Bridging the Gap assessment, September 2013

The power of the research lay in its ability to draw together and analyze data from multiple local, state, and national sources. Among key findings:

- Schools were more likely to offer 150 minutes of physical education per week if they were located in states with a law or policy requiring it. These findings, published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, combined data from the survey of state policies, school district wellness policies, and surveys of school administrators.\(^{13}\)

- Students in California, which has nutrition standards for competitive foods (those sold at school outside traditional school meal programs, such as through vending machines, special events, and student stores) reported consuming less fat, sugar, and total calories than students in states with no such standards. This was true for students in general and specifically among Latino students. This study, published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, compared the consumption of nutrients by students in California to consumption in 14 states without standards.\(^{14}\)

- Some 84 percent of food and beverage ads seen by children ages 2–11, and 96 to 97 percent of ads on children’s programming, were for products high in “nutrients to limit.”\(^{15}\) The study was published in *Childhood Obesity*.\(^{16}\)

- The odds of students being overweight or obese decreased if the students lived in more walkable neighborhoods. The study, published in the *American Journal of*

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15 Nutrients to limit are those that should be consumed in moderation, if at all, such as saturated fat, trans fat, sugar, and sodium. The Federal Trade Commission established the Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children, which developed recommendations for nutrients to limit.

Preventive Medicine, drew on a survey of more than 11,000 students and in-person observations of 154 communities where those students lived.17

- In the 2010–2011 school year, only 46 percent of students were in a school district with a wellness policy that included all of the elements required in the federal mandate. This represents a drop from 54 percent of districts in the 2009–2010 school year. These findings were published in an RWJF report.18

- Physical education requirements and student participation in physical education typically decline substantially in high school. About 87 percent of eighth graders were in schools that required them to take physical education, compared with only 20 percent of 12th graders. Participation was lower among low-income, Black, and Latino students than among White students.

The findings, published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, were based on data from more than 500 secondary school administrators and 54,000 high school students.19

- While the great majority of variation in BMI resides within any given school, “there remains enough variation between schools for school characteristics and school policies and programs to have had important effects on their students’ BMI.”20 This conclusion was drawn from a study, published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, that examined 14 years of data from the 1991–2004 Monitoring the Future surveys.

- Across a total study sample, the availability of regular and diet soft drinks was not related to students’ actual consumption of these beverages. However, availability did influence daily consumption among the subset of Black high school students sampled.

The study, published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine,21 combined data from more than 9,000 of the students participating in the 2010 and 2011

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Monitors the Future surveys and from administrators in the 329 secondary schools they attend.

- **Despite efforts in many schools to offer healthier foods and beverages, most students still had access to pizza, sugary drinks, and junk food.** In particular, Latino students were less likely to have a variety of healthy foods available through competitive venues than White students. Further, little progress had been made in promoting physical activity during or after school, or imposing physical education requirements for high school students.

These findings, published as a *Bridging the Gap* report, were based on surveys of school administrators about policies and practices in place during the 2006–2007 through 2010–2011 school years.\(^{22}\)

- **Existing taxes on soda, which are not much higher than 4 percent in grocery stores, do not substantially affect overall soda consumption or obesity.** Children who are already overweight, come from low-income families, or are Black, may be more sensitive than others to soda taxes, especially when soda is available at school.\(^{23}\)

The study with these findings, published in *Health Affairs*, drew on sales tax data and data about individual children.

See the Research section of the *Bridging the Gap* website for other published studies.

**Informing Policy**

> “Several aspects of Bridging the Gap’s work have positively influenced policy discussions.”—The program September 2013 assessment.\(^{24}\)

Here are a few examples of the program’s role in informing federal policies:

**Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Taxes**

*Bridging the Gap* staff provided testimony (upon written invitation), presentations, and other information about the language that could be used to develop model policies related to taxes on soda and snacks. For example, they advised the state of Vermont, as well as a Nebraska Medical Association committee working to remove the soda and energy drink exemption from the state sales tax.


\(^{24}\) See page 7, footnote 12.
Frank Chaloupka wants to see more policy change in this area. “Beverage taxation is of great interest to me given our past work [on cigarette taxes]. Our research hasn’t had the impact I would have hoped and we are still waiting for the United States to adopt higher taxation policies. I was recently in Mexico where they do apply significant taxes on soda. All of our research shows that tax and price policies make a difference.”

**School Nutrition Policies**

*Bridging the Gap’s* analysis of school nutrition policies is “the best in the field,” says Kelly Brownell, adding that it “has helped form the basis of a national policy that will affect all schools.”

The program assessment noted *Bridging the Gap’s* role in informing the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, legislation that established policy for the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) child nutrition programs. The legislation specifically required the USDA to promulgate regulations governing the sale of competitive foods in schools.

“Most of the new language surrounding the wellness policies, competitive foods and beverages emanated from the policy opportunities that were identified in *Bridging the Gap’s* [state and district] wellness policy reports,” observed Pinard and Gutman, who conducted the September 2013 assessment. They also noted that the program’s research synthesis on competitive foods was cited as a source throughout the proposed rule.

“I know that USDA looked at a lot of the work that came out of *Bridging the Gap* in order to develop their proposed rule,” said one participant interviewed for the assessment. “What ultimately comes of the final rule will be informed by what that research has shown.”

Lloyd Johnston looks ahead to making more contributions in this area: “We are well-positioned to measure compliance [with the USDA regulations] in those schools with those standards. We have spent a lot of time modifying our school questionnaire to measure the relevant factors.”

“I’ve used this [Bridging the Gap] information in our competitive foods brief. I’ve used it in presentations. I’ve given, and used this data when I’ve been contacted by legislative staff.”—September 2013 assessment interviewee
**Sharing Data and Research Findings**

In addition to its published research, the *Bridging the Gap* website makes state-by-state and national data publicly available to inform policy-makers, advocates, and other stakeholders. Among the information online:

- **State Laws for School Snack Foods and Beverages.** State-by-state descriptions of laws governing sales of food at school parties, in vending machines, at fundraisers, and community events.
- **Beverage and Snack Taxes.** State-by-state data on soda, snack, and bottled-water taxes, currently and in the past, as well as research briefs about taxing sugar-sweetened beverages and snacks.
- **School Policies and Practices to Improve Health and Prevent Obesity: National Secondary School Survey Results.** How schools approach the nutritional composition of food sold in schools, physical activity and physical education opportunities, wellness policies, and concerns of school administrators and, of particular importance, how these practices have been changing, mostly for the better.
- **School District Wellness Policies: Evaluating Progress and Potential for Improving Children’s Health Five Years after the Federal Mandate.** About the food and physical activity policies that school districts are implementing on their own or to better comply with federal mandates.

**Leveraging Funds**

*Bridging the Gap* leverages the Monitoring the Future study, which has been funded since 1975 for some $6 to $7 million per year by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). “We have been able to leverage Monitoring the Future at no cost to RWJF, and made constructive use of that without compromising anything we do with NIDA,” Johnston says. RWJF’s Orleans says “It has been a bargain for RWJF.”

Frank Chaloupka and his staff have secured almost $11.2 million in funds specifically for obesity studies from sources that include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Cancer Institute, the USDA, and other RWJF obesity-related national programs.

**WHAT CHALLENGES HAS BRIDGING THE GAP FACED?**

*Bridging the Gap* has faced relatively few substantive challenges in switching its focus to childhood obesity, largely due to its mature structure, strong internal systems, and effective and consistent leadership. Nonetheless, some people highlighted a few issues.
Learning a New Subject

Adapting to RWJF’s shifting focus on childhood obesity was initially challenging for Bridging the Gap leaders and staff, most of whom had focused their careers in the substance abuse arena. “None of us had ever done anything in obesity,” says Chaloupka. “It was challenging to figure out what the policy levers would be. That is why being part of the RWJF family helped, because they already had programs working on this.”

Chaloupka finds obesity a more complex area than alcohol and substance abuse because everyone needs to eat. “There are differences in how to change the behaviors—you can’t tell people not to do something; you have to get people to do things differently.”

Generating Timely Information

Inevitably, there is a tradeoff between providing in-depth data and making it available swiftly. “The great level of detail and the high quality of their outputs is a trade-off with the need to provide data in real time” said Courtney Pinard who helped to conduct the assessment. “I don’t know if there is a way to combine the two and have both real-time data and scientific quality and integrity. Maybe they can pick some issues for real time and some for the scientific.”

Another source of delay can be the time lag involved in publishing in peer-reviewed journals. “Because they are published researchers, we have to wait for that research to come out in journals … and that takes time so we can’t use what they found for a while,” says Jill Birnbaum, JD, executive director of Voices for Healthy Kids,25 a key user of Bridging the Gap products. To respond for the need for quicker and shorter synopses of findings of relevance to policy, Bridging the Gap has developed a number of publication formats in the last couple of years, including a series of research briefs that provide the field with one- to two-page synopses of important findings.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Continued Funding for Core Activities

In January 2014, RWJF renewed funding for many Bridging the Gap activities through April 30, 2015,26 but indicated that it would not fund the School District Wellness Policies after 2014. With help from the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition, RWJF is

25 Birnbaum is also vice president for state advocacy and public health at the American Heart Association.
26 ID# 71539 ($1,550,000; January 1, 2014 through April 30, 2015)
pursuing funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to continue collecting and reporting these data.

With obesity-related grants from RWJF becoming smaller and shorter, Chaloupka envisions making some changes in their research and doing more “rapid response” reports. “We can get ‘on the ground’ and see what happens. I think we will develop the evidence base in a more targeted way, looking perhaps more at communities than nationally.”

A number of stakeholders mentioned the continued help and leadership they expect from *Bridging the Gap*:

- The Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition’s Pinard: “I hope they continue to provide testimony and move policy forward. They have the scientific credence to step into that role.”

- Voices for Healthy Kids’ Birnbaum: “We will rely heavily on them for sugar-sweetened beverage tax information and competitive food information, and state by state information. We will look to them for technical assistance and support in our campaigns in those areas.”

  “*Frank [Chaloupka] tells us why a two-cent increase in the price of soda is important.*”—Jill Birnbaum, Voices for Healthy Children

**Supporting RWJF’s Vision of a Culture of Health**

Early in 2014, RWJF fundamentally changed its way of operating from having separate teams focused on separate goals (e.g., reducing the rate of childhood obesity) to being one Foundation with one goal: building a culture of health for America—“a grander whole of what being healthy and staying healthy means,” according to RWJF President and CEO Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, MD, MBA.

This change has implications for virtually all RWJF grantees and programs, and as of early 2014 many of the specifics are still unknown. Yet, Orleans, Chaloupka, and Johnston all believe that *Bridging the Gap*’s long history and success in tackling a variety of important issues positions it to be an important resource down the road.

Indeed, Chaloupka sees the philosophy underlying *Bridging the Gap* as totally in synch with the new emphasis: “I think everything we have been doing is trying to promote a culture of health, to identify what we can do policy-wise to help make those healthy decisions easier for youth and adults—the policies that promote a culture of health.”

Likewise, with almost four decades of information about multiple aspects of kids’ health, the NIDA-funded Monitoring the Future survey remains a key data source.
Johnston says: “We have a lot of health measures that connect to culture of health. We cover all substances, including prescription drugs, steroids, and others. In obesity, we cover diet, exercise, sleep, and kids’ ratings of their health. We also have measures of victimization and delinquency.”

Going forward, Orleans says, “Bridging the Gap can help us define the most important drivers and effects of a ‘culture of health’ for America’s youth—evaluating data from national, state, community and school policies/environments as determinants of a wide range of health and psychosocial outcomes for nationally representative samples of elementary, middle, and high school students. BTG leverages the $6 to $7 million annually invested in the Monitoring the Future survey by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) by adding a combination of original and archival data collections focused on school, community, state, and national policies and environments, including marketing/messaging environments. We now have longitudinal data going back more than 25 years so we can track trends in youth health behaviors and risk and protective factors, with consistently high response rates for surveys of school-level policy surveys (85% to 90% from school principals).”

“The partnership between the University of Michigan, which administers the annual Monitoring the Future survey and related school policy surveys, and the University of Illinois at Chicago, which compiles complementary data on youth-affecting federal, state and community policies, is strong and well-honed,” Orleans adds. “It is a unique national resource.”

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APPENDIX

Individuals Interviewed for This Report

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Kelly D. Brownell, PhD  
Dean  
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GRANTEE STORIES

Frank J. Chaloupka, PhD (posted November 2010)

Lloyd D. Johnston, PhD (posted November 2010)