

What can research evidence tell us about:

School dropouts at the transition between primary to secondary school: Causes and control measures

Key messages

- Available evidence does not highlight the causes of school dropouts at specific levels of the education system, such as from primary to secondary school, but it does so across the continuum of education.
- Causes of school dropouts are often a combination of a number of factors which build up to effect the dropout, rather than just one single factor. These are broadly categorised into;
 - Child/ learner related factors
 - Home/ household-related factors
 - School-related factors
 - Teacher related factors
- Control measures for school dropouts might differ between communities depending on their unique challenges.
- The suggested control measures address the different causes either singly or a combination of causes within or across causal categories, and these can be categorised as;
 - Child/ learner orientated, e.g. controlling child paid labour
 - Home/ community orientated, e.g. incentivise child school stay
 - School orientated, e.g. curriculum changes
 - Teacher orientated, e.g. strategies to reduce their absenteeism
- Addressing school dropout needs a multi-sectoral approach that draws on a number of stakeholders for most of the control measures.

Where did this Rapid Response come from?

This document was created in response to a specific question from a policy maker in Uganda in 2019.

It was prepared by the Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES), at the Uganda country node of the Regional East African Community Health (REACH) Policy Initiative.

+ Included:

- **Key findings** from research
- **Considerations about the relevance** of this research for health system decisions in Uganda

X Not included:

- Recommendations
- Detailed descriptions



Summary

Background:

High and persistent school dropout rates amount to wastage and are a primary concern to the provision of quality education especially in a developing country like Uganda. Buikwe District is no exception to the high school dropout rates, and thus the education leadership in the District seeks to know the possible causes and control measures of the school dropouts especially at secondary school transition stage.

Rapid Response Question:

What are the possible causes and control measures of the high and persistent school dropout rates in Buikwe District, with attention on the differences in the different communities (the fishing community in Njeru, the sugarcane out growers' in Lugazi, the slum areas, and the peri-urban dwellers), especially at secondary school transition?

Findings:

School dropout is a process, with several factors coming into play to effect the outcome. These can be categorised into child/learner-, home/household-, school- and teacher-related factors. There is limited information on the causes of dropout at the transition to secondary school, therefore, the evidence provided is for the general causes of school dropout.



Child/ learner related factors

- Poor academic performance
- Sex/ gender
- Ill health and pregnancy
- Paid work and peer influence
- Long distances to work
- Lack of information on returns to education



Home/ household related factors

- Poverty
- Household work
- Early marriage
- Migration
- Low education level of parents



School related factors

- Poor quality of education
- Curriculum not responsive to learners' needs
- Grade repetition
- Lack of a feeding program at the school



Teacher related factors

- Absenteeism
- Poor punctuality
- Failure to conform to norms and standards
- Sexual harassment

The available evidence for the control measures is of low to medium quality. Below are the school dropout suggested control measures;



Child/ learner oriented activities

- Ordinances on child labor
- Comprehensive sex education
- Health promotion activities
- Merit based scholarships and incentives
- Information on return to education



Home/ household oriented activities

- Reducing early marriages
- Limit jobs to after school hours
- Compulsory education
- Cash transfers



School oriented activities

- Lowering cost of education
- Creating a learner monitoring system
- Curriculum adjustments
- Improving access to schools
- Decentralising management and monitoring
- School feeding and health programs
- Computer assisted learning



Teacher oriented activities

- Supervision
- Incentives

Conclusion:

School dropout is a process and addressing it requires a combination of strategies and a multi-sectoral approach. The dropout has to be addressed before it occurs rather than after it has occurred.

Background

Uganda, in the late 1980s and early 1990s had very low literacy levels, standing at 56.1% for adult literacy in 1991 (1). In order to curb this, the government introduced Universal Primary Education in 1997 which has since seen a rise in the enrolment of children in primary education. In the year 2007, the government introduced Universal Secondary Education to bridge the gap for pupils from UPE transiting to secondary education. Much as this strategy has gained a lot in ensuring that children are enrolled into primary education, there is a challenge of school dropout (which is defined as any individual who leaves school for any reason before completion of the program or without transferring to another school(2)) within primary education level, as well as at the transition from primary to the secondary education level. Uganda reported a dropout rate of 75.16% (2, 3) in primary level improving to 64.5% in 2016(3, 4). The national average for the transition from primary level to secondary level of education stood at 58.95% as of 2016 (5). Buikwe District, in Uganda, is no exception to this phenomenon of school dropout. There is thus cause for alarm and in an attempt to address this challenge, The District Education Officer of Buikwe District requested for a Rapid Response Brief addressing the causes of school dropout and possible remedies to address the problem.

This rapid response brief, therefore, summarises the causes of learners' school dropout, and the different measures that have been fronted to address this challenge.

Summary of findings

In this rapid response brief, we have summarised the different causes of school dropout among learners. The evidence is obtained from reports, observational studies, and intervention studies. All the reports and studies included are from low- and middle-income countries, not restricted to Africa and are contextualizable to the case in Buikwe District.

Buikwe District is composed of four different populations. Much as some of the possible identified causes of school dropout can cut across the different communities in the District, others are specific to given communities depending on culture and norms. There is thus a need to appreciate which causes apply to which communities as this has a direct bearing on the potential control measures for particular communities.

Causes of school dropout

School dropout is regarded more of a process than a result of a single event (6, 7). Several factors come into play in accounting for school dropout, with poverty at the root of most of them. The causes of school dropout can largely be categorised into; 1) Child/ Learner related 2) Home/ House hold related 3) School related and 4) Teacher related factors. However, most of the work on the causes of school dropout is of low quality.

1) Child/ Learner related factors

- **Poor academic performance:** Poor performance in literacy and numeracy, in combination with class repetition which is direct result, has been cited as a cause for school dropout (6).

Contextualization: The study was done in rural parts of Kenya, which is closely related to Buikwe in terms of context. This makes it applicable to the case in Buikwe.

- **Sex:** Girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys (6). This is can be attributed to culture, norms and practices, gender based roles such as attending to household chores and sick individuals in the family (8).

Contextualization: One study was done in rural Kenya and another in three communities in Uganda. The culture, norms and practices in these regions do not differ a lot from those in Buikwe.

How this Rapid Response was prepared

After clarifying the question being asked, we searched for systematic reviews, local or national evidence from Uganda, and other relevant research. The methods used by the SURE Rapid Response Service to find, select and assess research evidence are described here:

www.evipnet.org/sure/rr/methods

- **Age:** Older children are more likely to drop out of school (6, 9). This is because they have higher opportunity costs of being in school as compared to younger children; they have more financial needs and are prone to looking for job opportunities.

Contextualization: The age at which learners start school is still high in most rural areas, and this is shown by the gross enrollment rates persistently being 100% in Uganda. This therefore is applicable to the case of Buikwe District.

- **Pregnancy:** Most girls drop out of school when they get pregnant. These rarely re-enroll for school after giving birth, thus contribute to overall observed rate of school dropout (8).

Contextualization: The teenage pregnancies account for 23% of female school dropout in Uganda (10).

- **Health (6, 11, 12);** Children's ill health and malnutrition have been shown to interfere with their participation and learning in school. With a learner chronically absent from school as a result of ill health, their performance is greatly affected, and it might be a demotivating factor for further school attendance.

Contextualization: Buikwe has a problem of malaria disease and this could have a play in learners missing school.

- **Paid work;** This has been cited to account for over 12% of all school drop outs in primary level of education in three communities in Uganda (8). Paid work provides an easy escape more so for boys working in the fishing industry and plantations as a means of providing for their families and meeting their financial needs. The children thus take this route as the jobs are readily available in the community and they promise a daily income to them.

Contextualization: With approximately 52 landing sites and a vast land mass covered by sugar cane plantations, paid work can explain the observed high rate of school dropout in the District.

- **Information on returns to education;** Drop out in low- and middle-income countries is often made at a much younger age, when students have little information about the potential returns on investment in education. Furthermore, learners in rural communities or small towns where few or no adults have attained high or any form of education, will have little information from which to infer, and there is a high possibility of the information they use to infer being inaccurate (13).

Contextualization: The rural communities in Buikwe have few adults who have attained high level of, or any education, and thus the learners are not adequately informed about the returns on education.

- **Peer influence;** If an individual's relative or friend joins a paid work activity such as the fishing industry, it is likely that that individual would also join upon seeing the friend earning money (8). This is more prevalent among the adolescents who are enticed by colleagues' perceived economic success when they start working, earning and buying a few tangible things such as bicycles.

Contextualization: This applies to the District as there are many children involved in the fishing industry as well as working on out grower farms for the sugarcane industries in the region.

- **Distance;** The primary schools are relatively near to the communities partly because they are many in numbers. However, the secondary schools are relatively fewer in numbers and thus are far from the communities. This has been cited as a reason for school dropout as the distances they have to travel for school are long(8). This is further augmented by the poverty where parents cannot enroll their children into boarding schools to avoid having to travel long distances.

Contextualization: Very few UPE and USE schools offer boarding school services, and even then, the service has to be paid for. This is a hindering factor to parents because they cannot afford the fees.

2) Home/ Household related factors

- **Poverty;** Universal Primary Education (UPE) was intended to provide free education for all. However, parents are supposed to provide for other school requirements such as uniforms, equipment and food.

However, with the lack of money, parents find it impossible to provide for the school requirements which eventually leads into school drop out of children(8, 14).

Secondary school is still largely paid for with a few schools in Universal Secondary Education (USE) plan. Children thus fail to join secondary education as a result of lack of money to pay the required tuition(8).

Contextualization: This applies to Buikwe District where parents have to provide money for lunch and other scholastic materials. This applies to secondary education as well in addition to the District having few USE schools to cater for its growing population of learners.

- **Household work (7);** Children are expected to combine school with household work. This leads to absenteeism at school and as household chores get heavier, they usually dropout of school. Furthermore, the heavy work, and missing school have been cited as a reason for fearing to sit exams and eventual drop out of school (7, 8). This challenge mostly affects the female gender where they are expected to help their mothers with household chores.

Contextualization: The low economic status in the District means that parents cannot have paid labor to help out with household chores and thus the need for the school going children to play that role.

- **Early marriage (7);** Girls drop out of school when they get married. The females are coerced into marriage once money for scholastic materials or progression from primary to secondary school runs out (8). This challenge also partly affects the boys, where when they get fellow students pregnant, they have to drop out of school and look after the girl and the new born baby (8).

Contextualization: Early marriages account for 35% of female school dropout in Uganda (10).

- **Migration (8);** Migration is linked to both increased or decreased education opportunities. Parents without permanent residences might move more frequently leading to a more frequent change of schools for learners, culminating into school dropout.

Contextualization: The fishing communities rarely have permanent homes and thus are prone to migration as they tend to move from one landing site to another in search of fish.

- **Low education level of parents (7);** When parents did not attain an education or have a low education level attained, they might not appreciate the investment in education. This most likely will play a role in lack of motivation or a demotivation of learners to stay in school.

Contextualization: This is applicable to Buikwe district where some parents have little to no formal education.

3) School related factors

- **Quality of Education;** Parents and children lack faith in the quality of education offered in the UPE and USE schools (8). They feel that private schools offer better quality of education, and this is backed by the national examinations results were they usually perform better than UPE and USE schools.

Contextualization: This study was conducted in rural areas of Uganda and thus is applicable to Buikwe District.

- **Curriculum:** The relevance of the school curriculum has been questioned by both parents and children, citing its inadequacies in addressing the day today economic activities in the region (8, 14) such as fishing, sugar cane growing and trade.

Contextualization: Uganda uses one standard curriculum across all Districts; therefore, the cited inadequacies of the curriculum also hold in Buikwe District.

- **Grade repetition:** Repetition of grades/ classes has been cited as demotivating and an embarrassment and thus a contributor to the eventual school dropout by the children(8, 14).

Contextualization: Efforts to reduce grade repetition have been scaled up in many UPE schools, however in some schools, learners are still made to repeat classes.

- **Food:** Schools that provide lunch to learners allow the learners to either go back during lunch time to eat, or to carry food to school. Learners who do not have anything to eat will not pay attention in the afternoon classes, while some of those who go home do not come back for afternoon classes. This has a direct bearing on learner performance and thus an indication on school dropout (8, 15).

Contextualization: Most UPE schools do not have a food program.

4) **Teacher related factors**

- **Professionalism:** Teacher absenteeism, poor punctuality and their failure to conform to local moral standards play a role in the eventual dropout of learners. The learners have also cited sexual harassment by teachers as a deterrent to joining and staying in school (8).

Contextualization: Teacher professionalism has been a key point of contention in many UPE schools, with government increasing the supervision and monitoring of schools.

Suggested measures to control school drop out

It is better to prevent school dropouts than to try address them once they have occurred. The control measures can broadly be categorised into; child/ learner-oriented activities, home/ community-oriented, school-oriented, and teacher-oriented activities. Most of the control measures are derived from reports and papers with no particular studies quoted. The measures derived from studies showed little to no impact on the suggested interventions in the control of school dropout. All included studies had a high risk of bias.

1) **Learner-oriented activities**

- **Ordinances and by-laws (8, 15):** These can be passed by the local government to help ensure that learners remain in school. Such ordinances include, but are not limited to;

- **Stopping school children under 18 from getting paid jobs;** It is assumed if children have no paying jobs before the age of 18, then they would stay in school at least up to that age, at which time it is expected they would be completing secondary school.

Assumptions: The parents can adequately work, earn and support the families and the learners while in school.

- **Limiting jobs to school children to after school hours;** If it is not possible to stop children from accessing paying jobs, especially as some children have to work to pay for their school fees, then limiting them to accessing work after school hours would help reduce school dropouts for work related reasons.

Assumptions: The parents can adequately work, earn and support the families and the learners while in school. The earnings from the learners after school work only supplement the overall household earnings.

- **Comprehensive sex education (16, 17):** This has been shown to reduce the rate of early pregnancy among school going children resulting in a reduction of school-drop out, especially among the female school population.

Assumptions: The parents are open and welcoming to comprehensive sex education in schools. The culture and norms of people are accommodative against early marriages for school going children.

- **Health promotion activities:** Activities such as the provision of deformers, vitamin A supplements and antimalarials in schools improve learner attendance in class. The reduced absenteeism has showed to have an improvement in child performance in class and eventual reduction in school dropout.

Assumption: The District Health Team is willing to cooperate in the activity and help in its successful execution.

- **Merit-based scholarships and incentives (11):** These are provided directly to the learners in form of cash transfers or other scholastic materials. Their aim is to improve learning outcomes by

rewarding students for their academic performances. This is especially considered in cases where staying in school involves a considerable opportunity cost.

Assumptions: The District or through its partners, has funds to roll out this program. It is also crucial not to limit the scholarships to the top performers only if the strategy is to work.

- **Information on returns to education (13):** Provision of information pertaining to potential returns on investing in education (both time and money) to learners has been suggested among several other control measures. The learners are provided with accurate information pertaining to estimated earnings per level of education attained, and it is expected this would motivate the learners to stay in schools. However, a study conducted in the Dominican Republic showed only a 4% difference in the number of learners who stayed in school in the group that received this intervention as compared to the group that wasn't taught the returns on education. This observed difference however might have been diluted by potential contamination between the intervention group and the control group.

Assumption: There are well trained individuals to deliver the information to learners in a simplified and easy to understand format.

2) Home/ community-oriented activities

- **Reducing early marriages;** This could be affected through the use of ordinances on teenage marriages as well as the provision of information to parents pertaining to opportunity costs of having their daughters attend and complete school.

Assumptions: The parents have alternative sources of income and are not looking at marrying off their daughters for financial gains.

- **Ordinances/ bye-laws(8)**

- **Compulsory education;** Instituting a policy of compulsory education could go a long way in ensuring that children of a given age group remain in schools as well as curtailing parents from playing an active role in the causes of their children's dropping out of school.

Assumptions: There are enough schools and resources that will enable the learners acquire quality education with minimal interferences from their day to day financial needs and house hold chores.

- **Limiting jobs to school children to after school hours;** In order to enforce this, the community has to be engaged encouraged to adhere to the set ordinances.

Assumptions: The parents can adequately work, earn and support the families and the learners while in school. The earnings from the learners after school work only supplement the overall household earnings.

- **Cash transfers (11):** These programs provide funds directly to mothers, households or children in response to school enrollment, attendance and completion of different grades in school. The cash transfer can be either conditional (money transferred upon achievement of a set target) or unconditional (transfer of funds does not come with any explicit condition).

Assumptions: This is highly dependent on the availability of funds

3) School-oriented activities

- **Lowering the costs of schooling (17);** There is free UPE in government schools. Furthermore, government avails some scholastic materials to learners, however, parents still have to provide other requirements including exercise books, uniforms, shoes, and feeding among others (17). If these other school related costs are lowered, it could help in keeping learners in school. However, the provision of text books has shown no impact on reducing the rate of school dropout (18).

Assumptions: The District, either directly or through donors and development partners, can create a fund to help subsidise or completely eliminate costs related to schooling.

○ **Creating a learner monitoring system for risk of drop out;**

There is a need to create a system that can easily identify children at a high risk of dropping out of school before they actually drop out (16). This requires the use of routinely collected learner data at schools, and should not only capture child characteristics, but also family ones. There are three suggested basic characteristics upon which others should build on in the warning system and these are;

- Academic achievements below standard
- Behavioral problems
- Chronic absenteeism

These are regarded as **ABC** characteristics(16). Other characteristics and region-specific characteristics that should be considered for Buikwe are; sex, early adult responsibilities, distance to schools, and progression in school.

When an individual who is at a high risk of dropping out is identified, different measures should be taken to address the challenges he/ she has as this can go a long way in ensuring that the learner stays in school. It however should be noted that addressing these issues requires a multi-sectoral approach.

Assumptions: There is deliberate collection of data and the data is analysed at different regular time intervals. There is a multi-sectoral collaboration in addressing the different challenges faced by learners at the highest risk of dropping out of school.

○ **Adjusting curriculum to cater for rural children with limited life choices;** Adjusting the curriculum to include technical subjects and agriculture related modules could be more applicable to individuals in rural, fishing communities. These individuals might have limited life choices as a result of poverty, and thus obtaining a skill from school might go a long way in addressing the curriculum issues. This could thus help keep the children in school.

Assumptions: The national curriculum is in line and supports the introduction of vocational and regional tailored curricula in schools.

○ **Improving access to school (8, 15);** This can be done through the construction of new schools, encouraging and facilitating the setting up of branches of already existing schools, setting up of boarding facilities at schools so that children stay in or close to the schools, and the use of mobile teachers who set up camps in underserved areas and teach learners for a given period of time.

Assumptions: The District, either directly or through donors and development partners, can create a fund to facilitate the option(s) selected.

○ **Increasing school resources and decentralising management decisions and community based monitoring (11, 19);** This strategy proposes the increase in the amount of resources allocated to particular schools, and allowing the school management to take lead in decision making. The management of the school does not only involve school staff, but parents as well. Parents should be engaged in deciding school improvement plans, purchase of supplies and implementation of the plans. This intervention as used in Mexico resulted in a 0.5% higher dropout rate among the group that received the intervention, however it showed that the dropout rate reduced by 2 learners per 1000 learners faster than the group that did not receive the intervention. The study however had selection bias, and it lacked experimental data, basing their results on an assumption regarding the determinants of participation into a program.

Assumptions: The parents and school management committees in the community are adequately empowered to engage in decision making of the schools. There are funds to

supplement the already allocated funds to the schools so as to increase the resources available to the school.

- **School feeding programs (8, 15);** Among the several reasons learners miss school and eventually drop out, feeding is key. If schools provide feeding, then learners will be able to attend school. However, it should be noted that school feeding programs may not have an impact in places where malnutrition is not a problem.

Assumptions: The District, either directly or through donors and development partners, can create a fund to provide feeding to school going children and the districts have bye-laws to effect the feeding programs.

- **School Health programs (11);** Well-nourished learners and free from disease are better able to participate in school activities, learn and have a good overall academic performance.

Assumptions: There is a sufficient number of health workers to be deployed in the different schools. The parents are open to the idea of their children's health being managed by health workers in the schools.

- **Computer assisted learning (11);** Computers in form of desktops or laptops are provided to support children's learning in school. It can be a comprehensive training of both teachers and learners to use computers for instruction and learning, or simply providing computer access to learners. This however requires the integration of the new technology in the existing learning approaches for it to be successful.

Assumption: There are sufficient funds to purchase the computers as well as train the teachers to be in position to adequately integrate ICT in teaching of their subjects.

4) Teacher-oriented activities:

- **Supervision of teachers (20);** It is proposed that increasing the supervision of the work of teachers would lower teacher absenteeism and increase teacher pupil interaction. This would address some of the issues raised as the causes of learner dropout of school. A study in India showed that in schools where supervision was enhanced, 182/1136 learners dropped out of school as compared to 191/1061 in schools where there was no supervision of teachers. This study however incorporated incentives in addition to the supervision.

Assumptions: There are enough teachers in the schools to teach the children. The District has funds to support the teacher supervisory activities.

- **Incentives (11, 21);** The provision of financial incentives to teachers to help ensure higher learner performance in school, while disincentivising them on learners who repeat class or drop out of schools has been studied. The results from Kenya show an insignificantly higher learner drop outs in schools where teachers are incentivised than in schools where teachers are not incentivised. This option should therefore be considered with caution.

Assumptions: This is applicable to Uganda as the study in Kenya was conducted in a similar setting to Buikwe District.

Summary table for tested interventions in studies/ trials (11)

Intervention	Number of studies (Number of participants)	Effect on drop out/ Estimated percentile change compared to control group (95% CI)	Interpretation
School feeding programs	3 (182,345)	-2.39%, 95% CI (-5.96%, 1.20%)	The feeding program resulted in 239 per 10,000 less school drop outs as compared to schools without the feeding program. This difference was however not statistically significant.
Merit based scholarships	2 (1,133)	1.60%, 95% CI (-4.38%, 7.53%)	The intervention resulted in 160 per 10,000 more school drop outs as compared to schools without the feeding program. This difference was however not statistically significant.
Eliminating user fees	4 (58,297)	-3.98% (-9.10%, 0.80%)	The intervention resulted in 398 per 10,000 less school drop outs as compared to schools without the feeding program. This difference was however not statistically significant.
Cash transfers	16 (169,938)	-4.78% (-6.75%, 2.79%)	The intervention resulted in 478 per 10,000 less school drop outs as compared to schools without the feeding program. This difference was however not statistically significant.
Teacher incentives	4 (59,410)	0.00%, 95% CI (-0.40, 0.40)	The intervention did not result in any difference in the dropout rates observed between the intervention group and the control group.
School based management	7 (22,943)	-0.80%, 95% CI (-1.99%, 0.00%)	The intervention resulted in 80 per 10,000 less school drop outs as compared to schools without the feeding program. This difference was however not statistically significant.
Community based monitoring	3 (2,280)	1.99%, 95% CI (-3.5%, 7.93%)	The intervention resulted in 199 per 10,000 more school drop outs as compared to schools without the feeding program. This difference was however not statistically significant.
Computer-assisted learning	2 (35,252)	-1.60%, 95% CI (-4.78%, 1.60%)	The intervention resulted in 160 per 10,000 less school drop outs as compared to schools without the feeding program. This difference was however not statistically significant.

Monitoring and Evaluation

There was paucity of information regarding the actual figures of school drop out in Buikwe District. To confirm that the chosen option to address the school dropout is working, there is a need to do a baseline survey of all children currently in the schools. This should be followed up with periodic surveys to ensure that the chosen option is being implemented as should be, and that it is achieving its set objectives.

Conclusion:

School dropout is more of a process than a result of single cause. In order to address the causes of school dropout, there is a need to combine different strategies that address the different causes, and it requires a multi-sectoral collaboration approach to be successful.

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What is a Rapid Response?

Rapid Responses address the needs of policymakers and managers for research evidence that has been appraised and contextualised in a matter of hours or days, if it is going to be of value to them. The Responses address questions about arrangements for organising, financing and governing health systems, and strategies for implementing changes.

What is ACRES?

ACRES – The Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES) is a center of excellence at Makerere University- in delivering timely evidence, building capacity and improving the understanding the effective, efficient and sustainable use of the rapid evidence syntheses for policy making in Africa. ACRES builds on and supports the Evidence-Informed Policy Network (**EVIPNet**) in Africa and the Regional East African Community Health (**REACH**) Policy Initiative (see back page). ACRES is funded by the Hewlett and Flora foundation. <http://bit.do/eNQG6>

SURE collaborators:



Regional East African Community Health Policy Initiative

www.eac.int/health



EVIPnet

www.evipnet.org

Glossary

of terms used in this report:

www.evipnet.org/sure/rr/glossary

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Conflicts of interest

None known.

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