

Real Clear Propaganda: Bellwether's Education News Bias

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Education news aggregation at the *RealClearEducation* (RCE) website purports to be journalistic, independent, thorough and somewhat representative of the whole. During a period from 2014 to 2016, however, it was run directly by leaders of the DC consulting group Bellwether Education Partners (BEP). During that period, RCE's selection of source material was lopsidedly skewed toward those issues and perspectives favored by those allied with BEP. Except for some occasional instances of pandering to the more politically well connected among the opposition, *RealClearEducation* was about as biased a news source as was humanly possible to construct. Its coverage of the Common Core Standards Initiative (CCSI), in particular, ranged from blatant promotion to a variety of disingenuously framed news and opinion pieces featuring individuals and organizations receiving funds from Common Core's donor groups, without revealing their conflict of interest. Bellwether's behavior in managing a news outlet raises larger questions about the trustworthiness of information provided by education policy funders and recipients, the incestuous nature of the interlocking interests at both ends of the funding, and the almost total absence of the vast majority of the US population from some education policy discussions.

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The website, *RealClearEducation*, purports to be journalistic and independent. During a period from 2014 to 2016, however, it was neither. Studying its operation during that period opens a window into the normally obscure operations of Washington, D.C. education policy consulting firms. One can learn much by analyzing the choices of *RealClearEducation*'s editors, then from the D.C. policy shop Bellwether Education Partners (BEP), regarding which content to include and how to spin it.

In its own words, the *RealClearEducation* web site provided daily updates of links to news, commentary, and reports, and published some original content and analysis. It belonged and still belongs to the *RealClearPolitics* journalistic family of web sites, along with *RealClearHealth*, *RealClearEnergy*, and so on. But, for an extended period, *RealClearEducation* was not like the other franchises. And, to its credit, it didn't claim to be.

The mother franchise, *RealClearPolitics* (*RCP*), claimed a standard journalistic mission for itself on its "About Us" page:

With a wide array of news and analysis available online, insiders rely on *RealClearPolitics* as the authoritative source for reporting, commentary, and analysis on all sides of the pressing public policy issues...¹

Megyn Kelly of Fox News affirmed the sentiment in a quote on the same page:

I really love *RealClearPolitics* because they post opinion pieces from all sides and it does help you get a broad worldview.

Whether or not *RCP* succeeded in covering a breadth of views from "all sides" of issues, they at least claimed the intent.

RCP's offshoot, *RealClearEducation*, made little effort in the Bellwether Partners era at breadth in its news coverage or analysis from "all sides" of issues. But, unlike *RCP*, it hadn't promised to. Here's the introductory mission statement for *RealClearEducation* (*RCE*) on the aforementioned "About Us" page:

"A one-stop shop for educational news and commentary, featuring the best education news, reviews and analyses from over 100 sources from the U.S. and abroad."

¹ <https://www.realclearpolitics.com/about.html>, December, 2016

Sliding over to *RCE*'s own web pages one could find a more detailed mission statement, which included [italics added]:

RealClearEducation is the hub for *the most critical and relevant* news, analysis and research in the world of education.²

RealClearEducation provides links to *the most impactful* news, *thoughtful* commentary and *important* reports and publishes original content and analysis. *RealClearEducation* allows you to efficiently access information *carefully curated from top* blogs, news channels, journals, think tanks, magazines and online publications on a daily basis.

The great mass of less critical, relevant, and impactful news, un-thoughtful commentary, unimportant reports, and middling blogs? That was not part of *RCE*'s mission then. But the adjectives used above eschew precise measurement. What one person considers "important" may not be "impactful" to another.

While granting the Bellwether-era *RCE* some respect for its forthrightness in not promising to be objective, balanced, or thorough, the following additional disclaimer seems odd:

RealClearEducation is a joint project between *RealClearPolitics* and Bellwether Education, a national non-profit organization working to improve education outcomes for underserved students. *RealClearEducation* operates independently, and no content should be considered to be the viewpoint of Bellwether, its team members, or any of its funders or clients.³

Read *RCE* of this period in any depth, however, and it becomes obvious that while it may have operated freely of *RealClearPolitics*, it did not operate freely of Bellwether Education. Bellwether documents and staffers ranked among the most frequently linked and cited in *RCE*'s daily web pages. Many other documents and reports were linked from organizations with which Bellwether worked.

In its own words, Bellwether Education Partners...⁴

...has carved out a special and desperately needed niche in the education reform landscape. We aren't just a think tank, or a consulting firm, or a human capital organization. We are all of the above and more, providing comprehensive, coherent, and lasting solutions to education's most longstanding and complicated problems.

Bellwether works with a broad array of organizations, including districts, states, charters, foundations, nonprofits, associations, and mission-driven for-profit organizations across the nation. Although there is substantial diversity among our client portfolio, all of our clients share a high level of urgency around driving better results for low-income and minority children – now.

²<https://www.realcleareducation.com/about.html>, December, 2016

³https://www.realcleareducation.com/sponsors_and_funders.html, December, 2016

⁴<https://bellwethereducation.org/about-us>, December, 2016

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Following the link to the “broad array of organizations” having worked with Bellwether and one found, essentially, a list of organizations whose staff, documents, and reports were also linked and cited daily in *RCE*.⁵ In other words, organizations partnering with Bellwether Education Partners were considered by Bellwether to be “most impactful,” “best,” “important,” and “relevant.” Coincidentally, these groups and their staffers appeared to provide much of the country’s most “thoughtful commentary” and “top” education policy blogs.

Despite the considerable length of Bellwether’s list of working partners, however, there existed many more organizations and expert individuals not working with Bellwether. They were much less likely to be included in *RCE*’s daily lists.

I can make this statement with confidence because I completed the exercise of gathering and analyzing *RealClearEducation*’s links — or, more precisely, the daily links provided in its “Analysis & Commentary” and “Research & Reports” sections—over the course of 18 months, from October 2014 through March 2016. I performed two levels of analysis. The first level incorporates the information one could see on *RCE*’s website: the title of the linked article, report, or other type of source document, name of author(s), and publication venue (*i.e.*, newspaper, magazine, organization web site) over the entire 18-month period.

The second level of analysis took more time, as it consisted of following each link to its source to read and understand the content and more thoroughly identify the individual or organization authoring it. A little over half of the total time period covered — 10 months — was included in this level of analysis.⁶

I wished to see whom Bellwether’s *RCE* relied on for expertise, for facts, for authority. Again, unlike other publications, *RCE* did not promise “a breadth of views” from “all sides” of issues. Rather, it promised the best, top, most important, impactful, and thoughtful. Which individuals and organizations fit this description in the minds of Bellwether Education Partners?

Simply by calculating the frequencies of links over time, the answer is clear. Consider the results from the first level of analysis — the publications and web sites linked across 18 months. I divide them into two distinct groups: first, newspapers, magazines, and similar platforms that hosted a variety of their own and (mostly) others’ writing; and second, think tanks, blogs, and professional and advocacy organizations with their own agendas, and government agencies. One might consider the latter category direct (from the source) opinion or expertise.

There existed thousands of individuals and organizations whom some would believe merited inclusion in *RealClearEducation*’s daily lists that were not to be found there. Still, in its “Analysis and Commentary” and “Research and Reports” sections over 18 months, *RCE* linked to almost 400 separate sources and over 2,000 source documents.

⁵<https://bellwethereducation.org/who-we-work>, December, 2016

⁶ Those months are October, November, and December 2014; January, February, March, June, September, and December 2015; and March 2016.

The spread of coverage is far from even, however. Of the over 170 publications in the newspaper and magazine category, just two — the *New York Times* and *RealClearEducation* itself — account for a quarter of all links. Add the *Washington Post* and *US News & World Report*, and just four publications account for one third of *RCE*'s links over 18 months. Add *Bloomberg View*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Education Week*, and half of *RCE*'s links lead to just seven of 170 publications. Just 15 publications account for two-thirds of the links. All but one of the top 15 most frequently referenced publications hail from just two cities, New York and Washington, D.C. (See Table 1.)

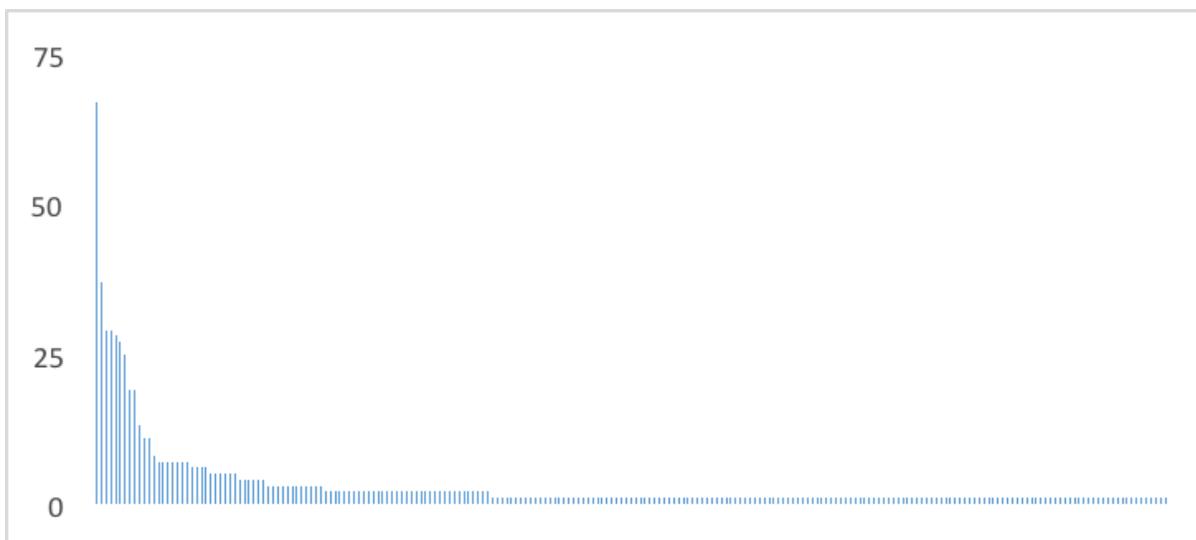
Table 1. Newspapers and magazines linked by *RealClearEducation*, October 2014 through March 2016

Rank	Publication	# <i>RCE</i> links	Cumulative # links	Proportion of total
1	<i>New York Times</i>	247		
2	<i>RealClearEducation</i>	126	373	One Fourth
3	<i>Washington Post</i>	93	466	
4	<i>US News & World Report</i>	79	545	One Third
5	<i>Bloomberg View</i>	68	613	
6	<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	62	675	
7	<i>Education Week</i>	61	736	Half
8	<i>Hechinger Report</i>	57	793	
9	<i>The Atlantic</i>	41	834	
10	<i>The Hill</i>	31	865	
11	<i>New York Post</i>	30	895	
12	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	25	920	
13	<i>Huffington Post</i>	22	942	
14	<i>New York Daily News</i>	22	964	
15	<i>Slate</i>	21	985	Two Thirds

Looking at linked web pages in the other category — of think tanks, professional organizations, advocacy groups, government agencies, and bloggers — the spread of link frequencies appears only slightly more even. Just five organizations—the Brookings Institution, *Education Next*, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the American Federation of Teachers' (AFT's) *Shanker Blog*, and the New America Foundation — accounted for a quarter of all links. Add Bellwether Education Partners itself and the American Enterprise Institute, and just seven entities accounted for one third of *RCE*'s links over 18 months. Add another ten sources⁷, and half of *RCE*'s links led one to just 17 of the 225 individual and organizational sources. (See Figure 1.)

⁷ The Center for American Progress, The 74, the US Education Department, ACT, Dropout Nation Blog, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Alliance for Excellent Education, the Center for Reinventing Public Education (at the University of Washington), the *Education Post*, and the Education Trust.

Figure 1. Distribution of link frequency from *RealClearEducation* to organizations and blogs, October 2014 through March 2016



So, the distribution in each category of sources is highly skewed. Eighty — almost half — of the 170 newspapers and magazines were cited only once over 18 months. More than 60 percent — 14 of 225 blogs, think tanks, and other organizations were cited only once.

Looking at the link frequency distributions another way, if one adds up all the links to all 130 of the newspapers and magazines cited by Bellwether’s *RCE* five or fewer times, it still would not reach the frequency for the *New York Times* alone. If one adds up all the links to all 150 of the newspapers and magazines cited nine or fewer times, it still would not equal the frequency with which *RCE* linked to the *New York Times* and *RealClearEducation*. And remember, there remain thousands of newspapers and magazines not linked even once in *RCE*’s “Analysis & Commentary” or “Research & Reports” sections during the time period.

Similarly, with the other source category of blogs and organization web sites: 140 sources were cited by *RCE* only once across 18 months. At the same time, three institutions alone — the Brookings Institution, the publication *Education Next* (a joint project of the Fordham Foundation, Stanford’s Hoover Institution, Harvard’s Program on Education Policy and Governance [PEPG]), and the Fordham Institute) — were linked about the same number of times.

Furthermore, counting *RCE* links over 18 months by *author of publication* draws another skewed distribution. *RCE*’s single most frequently linked author was Andy Rotherham, the founder of Bellwether Education Partners and board member of the advocacy group, The 74. Names of other Bellwether staff — Richard Whitmire, Sara Mead, and Chad Aldeman — also rank in the top 10. Take out the most often-cited newspaper and magazine columnists,⁸ and most other authors in the top 20 hail from other DC-area think tanks and advocacy groups: Kevin Carey and Conor Williams (New America

⁸ E.g., Jay Matthews (*Washington Post*); Megan McArdle (*Bloomberg View*); Jill Barshay (*Hechinger Report*); RiShawn Biddle (*Dropout Nation Blog*), and Frank Bruni and Joe Nocero (*New York Times*).

Foundation); Matthew Di Carlo (AFT’s Shanker Blog); Frederick M. “Rick” Hess (American Enterprise Institute); Michael Petrilli, Robert Pondiscio, and Chester Finn, Jr. (Fordham Institute]; Peter Cunningham (*Education Post*); Campbell Brown (The 74); and Martin West (Brookings Institution and Harvard’s PEPG). (See Table 2.)

Table 2. Authors most frequently linked by *RealClearEducation*, October 2014 through March 2016

Rank	First name	Last name	# RCE links	Affiliation(s)
1	Andy	Rotherham	35	Bellwether Ed Partners, The 74
2	Richard	Whitmire	32	Bellwether Ed Partners, The 74
3	Megan	McArdle	21	<i>Bloomberg View</i> ,
4	Jay	Mathews	21	<i>Washington Post</i>
5	Rick	Hess	20	American Enterprise Institute, <i>Education Next</i> , PEPG
6	Kevin	Carey	18	New America Foundation
7	Matthew	Di Carlo	18	<i>Shanker Blog</i> , AFT
8	Sara	Mead	17	Bellwether Ed Partners
9	Chad	Aldeman	16	Bellwether Ed Partners
8	Frank	Bruni	16	<i>New York Times</i>
10	Michael	Petrilli	14	Fordham Institute, <i>Education Next</i>
11	Robert	Pondiscio	13	Fordham Institute, <i>Education Next</i>
12	Campbell	Brown	11	The 74
13	Jill	Barshay	11	<i>Hechinger Report</i>
14	RiShawn	Biddle	11	<i>Dropout Nation Blog</i>
15	Joe	Nocera	11	<i>New York Times</i>
16	Chester	Finn, Jr.	10	Fordham Institute, <i>Education Next</i> , Koret Task Force
17	Peter	Cunningham	10	<i>Education Post</i>
18	Arne	Duncan	10	US Education Department
19	Martin	West	10	Harvard U, Brookings Institution, PEPG, <i>Education Next</i>
20	Conor P	Williams	9	New America Foundation

With the exception of Arne Duncan, the US Secretary of Education, the non-journalists in the list are professional pundits, with the time and resources to craft opinion pieces, have them edited, and shop them around among a wide variety of publication venues. They publish pieces both in their home venues and in plenty of others.

Observe, for example, who published in *US News & World Report*, a national magazine that Bellwether’s *RealClearEducation* linked to 75 times:

- 31 pieces were written by Bellwether staff;
- another 10 by staff of the American Enterprise Institute;
- 9 by Center for American Progress staff;

- 6 by staff at the Fordham Institute;
- 2 by staff at the National Alliance of Charter School Authorizers; and
- one each by New America and Progressive Policy Institute staff.

Bellwether’s *RealClearEducation*: A Window into the Echo Chamber

Survey *RCE* of this period long enough and it becomes clear whom *Bellwether Partners* considered most important, impactful, top, etc. Overwhelmingly, they were people based in just a few big metro areas who worked either for a handful of newspapers and magazines, or for think tanks or advocacy organizations favored by the national Democratic and Republican Party leadership. The original “Eduwonk” himself, Andy Rotherham, creator of Bellwether Education Partners, linked to others like him and those he knew personally. One critic asserted, “*RealClearEducation* is about Andy Rotherham, and it links to friends of Andy Rotherham.” True as far as it goes, but not complete.

RCE linkage patterns betrayed other tendencies, too:

- Clear preferences included:
 - research conducted by think tanks and DC-based advocacy organizations instead of peer-reviewed journal articles;
 - research conducted by economists and political scientists rather than psychologists or education practitioners; and
 - big city newspaper editorials, rather than “grassroots” blog posts.
- When *RCE* linked to not-so-well-known individuals and organizations, they tended to be:
 - funded by the same foundations that had hired or funded Bellwether Education Partners;
 - organizations that had conducted work for those foundations or for Bellwether (essentially providing them free advertising);⁹ or
 - individuals and organizations that cite and reference each other, in a closed loop, and not the vast population and information pool outside the loop.

For expertise on education policy, Bellwether’s *RealClearEducation* overwhelmingly favored two groups, the first being the “Democrats for Education Reform” wing of the Democratic Party’s policy world. They support traditional education establishment positions, such as increased funding for public education and most racial/ethnic/class equity efforts — but also favor school choice (*i.e.*, charters, vouchers), school accountability, and the Common Core Initiative. These Democrats were well represented in such organizations as Bellwether Education Partners, Center for American Progress,

9 *E.g.*, Consider these “in-kind payment” promotional links: Oct. 15, 2014, to Learning Accelerator and 2Revolutions, educational technology consultants to Bellwether; Oct. 21, 2014, to Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Vanderbilt University, working with New America on STEM pipeline issues; Nov. 21, 2014, to Center for Study of Child Care Employment (Cal Berkeley), which works for the Gates Foundation; Feb. 5, 2015, to Cartier Winning Images, and March 9, 2015, to Thaw Strategies, both PR firms that worked for Bellwether; Feb. 23, 2015, a link to New Jersey Educators for Sustainability, which conducts “adapting to Common Core workshops”; and Dec. 10, 2014, to KOYA Leadership Partners, an executive search firm used by many of the Bellwether-aligned nonprofits.

Or, consider these straight-up promotions for organizations affiliated with Bellwether: Nov. 11, 2014, to Service to School; Feb. 11, 2015, a plug for Microsoft; March 31, 2015, two Johns Hopkins University professors plug their own nonprofit; Sept. 11, 2015, another plug for Families Empowered in Houston; Dec. 14, 2015, yet another for Insight Education Group; and several *RCE* references to Bryan Hassel’s nonprofit, Public Impact,

Center on Education Policy, New America Foundation, *Education Post*, and Alliance for Excellent Education. Perhaps in the interest of not burning bridges, though, *RCE* paid adequate attention to some of the more traditional Democratic Party groups, such as the National Association of State Boards of Education and the American Federation of Teachers (which generally supported Common Core, but not school choice and accountability efforts).

The second group was on the Republican side of education policy issues. Bellwether's *RCE* overwhelmingly favored the Beltway think tankers and academic economists and political scientists assembled around *Education Next* and the Hoover Institution's Koret Task Force on K-12 Education.¹⁰ Around the turn of this century, the Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) at Harvard University, the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and the Fordham Foundation (and Institute) of Washington, DC pooled their resources to cement their presumed authority as the unrivaled "other side" on education policy issues. The Harvard and Stanford folk brought the scholarly prestige, and Fordham chipped in cash and D.C. and Republican Party contacts. *Education Next* is their joint publication platform, but just one of many to which group members seem to have ready access.¹¹

Education Next staff and the Koret Task Force members, however, comprise just the core of the in-group's policy hegemony. Former students and workmates of a single Harvard political science professor occupied most of the lead education policy posts at nationally focused think tanks (e.g., Brookings, AEI, Manhattan); the Fordham Institute founder's favorite former assistants ran the Fordham Foundation (and edited *Education Next*); the spouse of the Hoover Institution's chief education economist ran another think tank at Stanford. Harvardians and Stanfordites overpopulate the education policy desks at the Brookings Institution and the National Bureau for Economic Research (which is neither national nor public), housed near the Harvard campus. Other favorite former students or office workers of theirs and affiliated others operate the Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at the University of Washington and the Walton-funded Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, located near Walton's Bentonville headquarters.

How the *Ed Next*/Koret Task Force group gate-keeps what the public gets to hear is simple: Those who honor their presumed eminence may be acknowledged by them as worthy — invited to participate in panels, cited and referenced in group publications, and mentioned to journalists as good sources for stories. Those who criticize their work are shunned or ridiculed (witness, for example, how they treated Myron Lieberman, one of our country's foremost experts on school governance and labor relations,

10 In its own words, "The K-12 Education Task Force focuses on education policy as it relates to government provision and oversight versus private solutions (both within and outside the public school system) that stress choice, accountability, and transparency; that include systematic reform options such as vouchers, charter schools, and testing; and that weigh equity concerns against outcome objectives." Current members are Bill Evers, Checker Finn, Eric Hanushek, Paul Hill, Carolyn Hoxby, Tom Loveless, Terry Moe, Paul Peterson, and Grover Whitehurst. They also serve as the editorial board for *Education Next*. Current "significant" funders include the Koret Foundation; the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation; Mrs. Edmund W. Littlefield; the Bernard Lee Schwartz Foundation, Inc.; and Tad and Dianne Taube and the Taube Family Foundation

11 Other platforms include, for example, the newsletters and blogs of the Hoover Institution, Brookings Institution, Manhattan Institute, Fordham Foundation and Institute, American Enterprise Institute, Harvard University, Stanford University, University of Washington, University of Arkansas, Koret Task Force, George W. Bush Center, the National Bureau for Economic Research, and the publications *Education Week*, *National Affairs*, and *US News & World Report*.

after he criticized them for making policy proclamations on a topic they had made little effort to learn), or how they have treated Diane Ravitch after she broke with them on some policy issues.¹²

Certainly, members of the *Ed Next*/Koret group have expertise. It does not, however, extend to all education topics. They and the other policy wonks they acknowledge as worthy of attention have trained as academic political scientists and economists, and some have worked as congressional staff. Thus, they tend to know about education governance, political processes, education finance, and labor economics.

They know much less about curriculum, instruction, psychology, or assessment, which happen to be the very topical areas in which subject mastery would be required for a genuine expertise on many education policy stories, including the Common Core Initiative. Moreover, aside from an occasional year or two as teachers in their youth, most *Ed Next*/Koret group scholars betray little familiarity with day-to-day work inside the education industry as education administrators, analysts, program evaluators, or assessment developers.¹³

A lack of relevant training and experience in the tight-knit, overly self-referencing *Ed Next*/Koret and Democrats for Education Reform groups does not always discourage them from offering policy prescriptions, however.¹⁴ Nor does it discourage journalists from asking for them. As long as journalists and policymakers narrowly source their information from those whose skill at public promotion exceeds their knowledge, they will not source it from the most knowledgeable.¹⁵ Our collective

12 Phelps, R. P. (2014, June). The Cork in the Bottle. *Journal of School Choice* 8(2), pp. 309–321.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15582159.2014.907698#abstract>

13 See: Burnett, D. (2016, March 1). The myth of the know-it-all scientist. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/science/brain-flapping/2016/mar/01/the-myth-of-the-know-it-all-scientist>; Castel, A.D., McCabe, D.P. Roediger, III, H.L., & Heitman, J.L. (2007). The dark side of expertise: Domain-specific memory errors. *Psychological Science*, 10(1); Clabaugh, G.K., & Rozycki, E.G. (2011, December 6). Politics, consensus, and educational reform. *New Foundations* [blog] <https://www.newfoundations.com/PolEdReform/PolEdRef.html>; Cuban, L. (2010, February 29). Overconfident experts as poor predictors. *Larry Cuban on School Reform and Classroom Practice* [blog]. <https://larrycuban.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/overconfident-experts-as-poor-predictors/>; Feltman, R. (2015, July 20). Self-proclaimed ‘experts’ more likely to fall for made-up facts, study finds. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2015/07/20/self-proclaimed-experts-more-likely-to-fall-for-made-up-facts-study-finds/>; Kenyon, G. (2016, January 6). The man who studies the spread of ignorance. *BBC Future*. <https://www.bbc.com/future/story/20160105-the-man-who-studies-the-spread-of-ignorance?ocid=fbfut>; McClay, W. M. (2009, Fall). What do experts know? *National Affairs*, 1, 145–159.
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14 [¶]See also: Fox, J. (2016, January 5). Academic publishing is all about status, *Bloomberg View*.
<https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-01-05/academic-publishing-is-all-about-status>; Makel, M.C. & Plucker, J.A. (2014, August 22). Facts are more important than novelty: Replication in the education sciences. *Educational Researcher*, 20(10), 1-13; Powers, D. (2015, August 18). First! Cultural circulation in the age of recursivity. *New Media and Society*, 1-16.
https://www.academia.edu/15033009/First_Cultural_Circulation_in_the_Age_of_Recursivity;

15 [¶]See also: Kendzior, S. (2015, March 6). Academia’s 1 percent. *Vitae*. <https://chroniclevitae.com/news/929-academia-s-1-percent>; Kolowich, S. (2016, February 2). The water next time: Professor who helped expose crisis in Flint says

working memory is finite, as is the amount of attention policy-makers and the public grant to education issues. Large bodies of research evidence and perspectives are ignored by U.S. education journalists and policymakers simply because they rely on a few small, homogenous, and unrepresentative groups to represent vast, heterogeneous realms of evidence and opinion.¹⁶

One might also reasonably accuse Bellwether's *RealClearEducation* of over-representing funders of education policy work (e.g., the Gates, Broad, Hewlett, Joyce, Walton, Packard, and Lumina Foundations) and the individuals, initiatives, and organizations receiving their funds. Unfunded organizations — the truly independent — were virtually unrepresented in *RCE*'s pages during the time period.

But, even considering the surfeit of attention to foundations, inside education associations, advocacy groups, and D.C.-area think tanks, those not aligned with Bellwether Education Partners' policy preferences were less frequently referenced in *RCE* link lists. Many never were.¹⁷

Figure 1 above displays the distribution of frequencies with which organization web sites and blogs were linked in *RCE*'s "Research & Resources" and "Analysis & Commentary" sections. Though highly skewed, the distributions still seem to include a large number of sources. Classifying *RCE*'s favorite information sources into the two groups described above — the Democrats-for-Education-Reform group and the *Education Next*/Koret Task Force group — however, comprises half of *RCE*'s direct links to organizations and blogs. That's half of the organizations Bellwether chose to reference at all, which is much less than half of all the organizations that would have been linked in a thorough effort at representative sampling and viewpoint diversity.

The evidence of bias in Bellwether's *RCE* is overwhelming — essentially toward Bellwether Education Partners' declared policy preferences and exposure for the projects funded by the funders that supported them and their colleagues. To illustrate, consider *RCE*'s coverage of the Common Core Initiative during the time period.

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16 [¶]See also: Ledzińska, M., & Czerniawska, E. (2008). The importance of cognitive selectiveness in the age of information flood. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 5. 80–86; Levitt, L. (2014, May 8). Publish and publicise, or perish: The importance of publication impact by Mark Rubin. PhD2Published; Phelps, R.P. (2016, April 28). The Education Writers Association casts its narrowing gaze on Boston, May 1–3. *Pioneer Institute Blog*. <https://pioneerinstitute.org/featured/the-education-writers-association-casts-its-narrowing-gaze-on-boston-may-1-3/>; Resnick, B. (2016, January 22). What journalists get wrong about social science, according to 20 scientists. *Vox Science and Health*. <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2016/1/22/10811320/journalists-social-science>

17 [¶]There does seem to be an effort made to diversify along racial/ethnic lines, with many links to African-American, and to a lesser extent Hispanic, groups and individuals. Viewpoint diversity, however, does not seem to be a priority.

Shilling for Common Core

Bellwether's *RealClearEducation* made barely any effort at balance on coverage of the Common Core Initiative. Indeed, the only substantial critical presence comprises the few straddlers who took money from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and then, when it became clear that Common Core was not the *fait accompli* that had been promised, orchestrated the “good idea; poor implementation” pretense, which is not the same as opposition.¹⁸

Some individual and organizational Common Core opponents were occasionally linked ...on other topics (e.g., George F. Will, Quin Hillyer, Peggy Noonan, Pedro Noguera, Ben Wildavsky, Lance Izumi, Jay P. Greene, and David J. Armor were each linked once on non-Common Core topics). *RCE* linked to Common Core critics Diane Ravitch, Stanley Kurtz (*National Review*), and AFT member Peter Goodman twice each, but not about Common Core. *RCE* linked to Common Core critics Aaron Pallas (Columbia University), Neal McCluskey (Cato Institute), and Jason Bedrick (Cato Institute) each three times, but not on Common Core. Moreover, most Common Core critics, as well as many excellent blogs¹⁹, were never linked in *RealClearEducation* during the time period, on any topic.²⁰

So, did *RealClearEducation* stonewall Common Core criticism completely? No, that might have made their bias too easy to demonstrate. *RCE* referenced critical writings of 11 individuals and one group.²¹

All told, 34 individuals or organizations known to oppose the Common Core Initiative were referenced 54 times over 18 months of *RCE*. Of those 54 links, only 15 pertained to Common Core. Incidentally, four of the 15 links direct one to writings of Stanford's Williamson Evers—one member of the *Education Next*/Koret Task Force group opposed to Common Core.

18 [¶]E.g., American Enterprise Institute, American Federation of Teachers. See, for example, an interesting essay by Peter Cunningham in the *Education Post* (September 28, 2015) comparing the “old” and “new” Rick Hess, Hess being of the American Enterprise Institute, which accepted Gates Foundation money early on to promote Common Core. Also on point is Sam Dillon's May 21, 2011 column in the New York Times: https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/22/education/22gates.html?_r=1&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss

19 [¶]E.g., CCSSI Mathematics, LifeZette, Pioneer Institute, Heartland Institute, Heritage Foundation, Truth in American Education, Caffeinated Thoughts, Missouri Education Watchdog, Bluegrass Institute, Nonpartisan Education Group, and countless state and local “Stop Common Core” grassroots citizens' groups across the country.

20 [¶]The 18 months of *RCE* contain over two thousand links. Just some of the many knowledgeable Common Core opponents *not* referenced over that long span of time: Peter Wood, R. James Milgram, Michelle Malkin, John Stone, Alan Singer, Carol Burris, Mercedes Schneider, Duke Pesta, Marina Ratner, Barry Garelick, Ted Rebarber, Lisa Jones, Joye Walker, Scott Garrett, Richard Innes, David Randall, Charles Grassley, Robert Eitel, Kent Talbert, Ralph Ketcham, Teresa Mull, Alan Caruba, Heather Kays, Anthony Esolen, Brad McQueen, Nancy Thorner, Donna Hearne, Terrence Moore, Donna Garner, David Anderson, Wayne Bishop, Anthony Cody, Lindsay Graham, Ted Cruz, Phyllis Schlafly, Mary Grabar, Rand Paul, Joy Pullmann, Lennie Jarratt, Steven Rasmussen, Craig Sower, Thomas Newkirk, Mark McQuillan, Jason Becker, Will Fitzhugh, Emmet McGroarty, Jane Robbins, and Shane Vander Hart.

21 [¶]They are teachers Michael Godsey, Mia Hood, and Brian Zorn; the Heritage Foundation; Nicholas Tampio, a Fordham University professor writing for *Al Jazeera* (twice); Jim Stergios (Pioneer Institute); Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal; Robert Holland (Heartland Institute); Jason L. Riley (Manhattan Institute), Alveda King (Alabama Eagle Forum), and Williamson Evers (Stanford University). Also linked is a short newspaper debate between critic Sandra Stotsky and a Common Core supporter.

Meanwhile, over the same period, *RCE* linked to individuals or organizations known to support the Common Core Initiative 850 times. One hundred and sixty times, Bellwether's *RealClearEducation* linked to pro-Common Core articles, reports, essays, and outright PR promotions.

Contrasting the number of links to supporters to the number to opponents: 850 to 54 (Figure 2).
Contrasting the number of links to promotional documents to the number to oppositional documents: 160 to 15 (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Number of links to known supporters and opponents of Common Core Initiative, October 2014 through March 2016

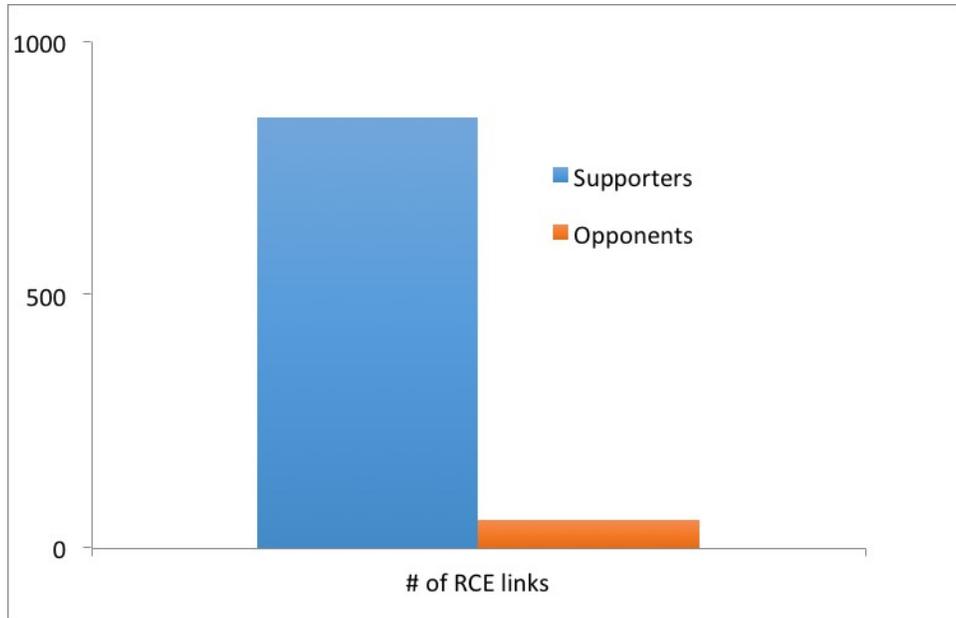
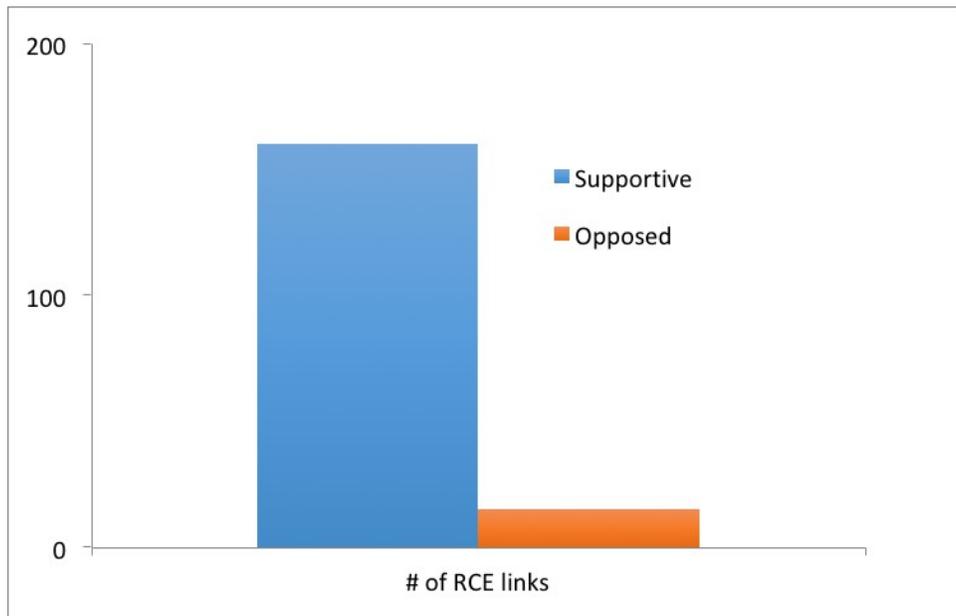


Figure 3. Number of links to articles supportive or opposed to Common Core Initiative, October 2014 through March 2016



But those are just the summary statistics on Bellwether's *RealClearEducation* Common Core bias. The deeper, second level of analysis through the *RCE* archives reveals some interesting anecdotes:

- From February through July of 2015, the education-focused *Hechinger Report* hosted a debate between Carol Burris, a New York State school district superintendent and Common Core opponent, and Jayne Ellspermann, a Florida high school principal, National Association of Secondary School Principals Principal of the Year, and Common Core supporter. Over the course of six months, each wrote six essays. Three of Ms. Ellspermann's Common Core-supportive essays were described and linked in *RealClearEducation*; none of Ms. Burris's essays were ever mentioned.²²
- Jay Mathews of the *Washington Post*, who had been fully supportive of the Common Core Initiative at first, was referenced by *RealClearEducation* 21 times. *RCE* never referenced Valerie Strauss, the *Post*'s other K-12 education columnist and an outspoken opponent of Common Core at the time.
- In January 2015, *RealClearEducation* referenced an op-ed column in the U.S. Military newspaper *Stars & Stripes* promoting Common Core. But *Stars & Stripes* had published the piece as half of a point-counterpoint pair. *RCE* did not reference the companion column opposing Common Core.
- *RCE* linked to an anti-Common Core op-ed written by Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal in the *Wall Street Journal* (February 10, 2015), but smothered it with eight critical editorials from the pro-Common Core *New Orleans Times-Picayune*.²³ Several links were also provided to Louisiana Common Core sympathizers John White (state superintendent), Public Impact, *The Advocate*, and New Schools for New Orleans.
- Some regional newspapers were referenced, but only when they published editorials or op-eds supporting Common Core: e.g., *Catalyst Chicago*; *Charlotte Observer*; *Columbus Dispatch*; *Oklahoman*; *Portland Press Herald*; *Scholastic*; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; *Stars & Stripes*; *The State* (South Carolina); *Toledo Blade*; the *Phoenix Business Journal*.
- Bellwether's *RCE* repeated stories. A lot. Favored pundits might write a basic pro-Common Core opinion piece (i.e., op/ed) and send it around to local newspapers throughout the country ostensibly tailored to each local audience. Once one local newspaper publishes the piece, it can then be altered slightly and sent to another. This way, we get essentially the same pro-Common Core op/ed published many times throughout the United States, by Mike Petrilli one day in a Boise, Idaho newspaper, by Chad Aldeman (of Bellwether Education Partners) the next day in Buffalo, New York, by Wade Henderson (of the Leadership Conference) the following day in Tallahassee, Florida, by Carmel Martin (of the Center for American Progress) the fourth day in

22 [¶]See <https://hechingerreport.org/category/columnists/core-debate/>

23 [¶]Those pieces featured titles such as “Jindal Plan to Ditch ‘Core’ Would Take Louisiana Backward” (March 19, 2015) and “Jindal Abused His Power on Common Core” (June 19, 2015). Other pro-Common Core, critical-of-Jindal editorials were published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* (and linked by *RealClearEducation*) Dec. 3, 2014; February 9, 2015, and March 6, 2015.

San Luis Obispo, California, and, on day five, by Ted Lempert (of Children Now) in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. *RealClearEducation* frequently linked to such duplicative op-eds.

- *RCE* gave loads of favorable coverage to Common Core proponent Jeb Bush, and little coverage to other presidential candidates.

Finally, one observes loose bounds of propriety in *RCE*'s linking when criticizing Common Core Initiative critics. Significant amounts of nasty, condescending, speculative innuendo made their way into the lists.²⁴ In general, one would get this message from Bellwether's *RCE*: Common Core advocates are knowledgeable, altruistic, and pure of heart; opponents are either ignorant locals, educators opposed to standards and accountability because they're incompetent, or hypocritical and self-serving politicians, pandering to the basest instincts of the uninformed masses and entrenched vested interests.

As lopsided as *RCE*'s Common Core coverage was, their coverage of other issues were perhaps even more so. Consider the short-lived debate on federal testing mandates during deliberations for the new federal ESSA law. If you had relied on *RealClearEducation* as your only source of news and expertise at the time, you would have been well exposed to those arguments favoring federally required annual testing and a continued federal role in local schools. But you would have had barely any exposure to arguments on the other side, say, for less onerous, but more subject matter inclusive "grade span" testing (the kind most other countries use), with fewer federal requirements. *RCE* frequently linked to essays arguing for increased federal control, more student-data-gathering, and preservation of the national Common Core aligned tests in any test-reduction scheme (*i.e.*, dump the allegedly inferior state and local tests instead).

"Social entrepreneurs" ...by the thousands

While biased towards Bellwether's policy preferences and partner organizations, *RCE* at least tried not to appear *completely* elitist. Every several days or so, *RCE* linked to an obscure organization I know of now only because of *RCE*. These links do not, however, seem to have been randomly selected. Investigate the organizations a bit and one discovers: (1) they aligned well with Bellwether's policy preferences and work projects, and (2) they received funding from the Gates and other familiarly named foundations (*e.g.*, Hewlett, Broad, Lumina, Joyce, Walton) that frequently pooled their resources to fund Bellwether Education Partners and similar organizations. (See the Appendix for a list of some of these organizations with links to web pages with donor and board member lists, for those that reveal their funding sources.)²⁵

24 ¹See, for example, Campbell Brown, March 2, 2015 in the *Washington Post*; the *New York Times* editorial board, June 8, 2015; the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*'s editorial on the same day; Paul Peterson's August 20, 2015 declaration in *Education Next*; Jennifer Rubin's excoriation of Scott Walker (June 11, 2015) in the *Washington Post*; Bruce Taylor's insistence in *Catalyst Chicago* that Common Core is a *fait accompli* (November 13, 2014); Emmaline Zhao's describing Common Core opponents, "Haters gonna hate?" in *RCE* (March 27, 2015); a Farleigh Dickenson University "Public Mind" poll, sponsored by the pro-Common Core education school finds Common Core opposition riddled with "false beliefs" on Feb. 23, 2015; Laura Waters's or David Weigel's criticism of Chris Christie's and Andrew Cuomo's allegedly self-serving "flip flops" in *Newsworks* (December 5, 2013) and *Bloomberg View* (October 20, 2014), respectively; or the stereotyping humiliation of Common Core critics by Jennifer Hanno in the May 1, 2015 *McSweeney's*.

25 ¹This behavior is sometimes called "astroturfing" <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/astroturfing>

These obscure organizations, run by “social entrepreneurs,” may have been doing admirable work. But, in many cases, their work had little to nothing to do with curriculum, instruction, assessment, or Common Core. Nonetheless, many of them went out of their way to publicly express support for the Common Core and its related assessments, a cause supported by their funders.²⁶

One wonders how many of these nonprofits will last. Are they the education reform equivalent of education establishment fads, with ample funding fueling endless treks toward unreachable mirages? One wonders how much more those billions might have accomplished if, instead of funding marginally sustainable entrepreneurial nonprofits run by public-policy analysts, they had built, say, a directly effective Milton Hershey School, Boys’ Town, and Girls’ Town in each U.S. state, run by educators.²⁷

One more way in which *RCE* at least tried to appear not completely elitist was by the occasional link to seemingly typical individual school staff. These *RCE* links, too, do not seem to have been randomly selected, however. Investigate the individuals a bit and one inevitably discovers a web of well-funded connections.

Seemingly ordinary, could-be-your-child’s teachers just happened to be writing op-eds for major publications asserting their support for Common Core. But the op-eds read like ones appearing elsewhere: professionally written, polished, with familiar talking points. Colorado’s Tyler Lawrence²⁸, upstate New York’s Meaghan Freeman²⁹, and Michigan’s Danielle Alexander³⁰ were “Teaching Fellows” with America Achieves³¹ when they wrote their pro-Common Core essays. Denver 4th-grade teacher Kyle Schwartz was working with Teach Strong³² when she published pieces in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Washington Post*.³³ Oakland, California’s Robbie Torney and New Iberia, Louisiana’s

26 [¶]*E.g.*, Nov. 24, 2014 and Mar. 20, 2015 to Stand for Children; Dec. 5, 2014 to Teach Plus; Dec. 12, 2014 to iNACOL; Nov. 10, 2014 to the Alliance for College-Ready Charter Schools and Achievement First; Feb. 5, 2015 to Cartier Winning Images.

27 [¶]See: Piereson, J., & Riley, N.S. (2013, December 6). The problem with public policy schools. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-problem-with-public-policy-schools/2013/12/06/40d13c10-57ba-11e3-835d-e7173847c7cc_story.html?tid=a_inl.

28 [¶]May 4, 2015, op-ed in the *Colorado Springs Gazette*.

29 [¶]Feb. 4, 2015, op-ed in *The Atlantic*.

30 [¶]Feb. 16, 2015, op-ed in the *Detroit News*.

31 [¶]America Achieves receives funding from the “Laura and John Arnold Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Charles Butt, the Heckscher Foundation For Children, the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the George Kaiser Family Foundation, the Kern Family Foundation, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and others.” <https://americaachieves.org/our-funders/>.

32 [¶]“The organizational partners in TeachStrong“ are listed here: <https://www.americanprogress.org/press/release/2015/11/10/125052/release-40-education-organizations-unite-to-launch-teachstrong-a-campaign-to-modernize-and-elevate-the-teaching-profession/>.

33 [¶]Mar. 24, 2015 in the *Chicago Tribune*; Mar. 25, 2015 in the *Washington Post*.

Lauren Trahan were “part of Student Achievement Partners' Core Advocate program” when they wrote their commentary for *RealClearEducation*.³⁴ Memphis’s Karen Vogelsang was a Hope Street Group Fellow³⁵ when she wrote her pro-Common Core two-bits for the *Nashville Tennessean*. Boston’s Emily Griggs was a Teach Plus Policy Fellow³⁶ and a teacher in the UP Education Network³⁷ when she wrote a pro-Common Core commentary for *RealClearEducation*.³⁸

Many former state teachers of the year wrote Common Core affirmations linked by *RealClearEducation*.³⁹ Indeed, there exists an organization entitled National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY), funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Pearson and ETS, the PARCC test developers and administrators, College Board, the National Education Association, and several other Common Core backers.⁴⁰ Several senior administrators from the Educational Testing Service, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) [the co-owner of the Common Core Standards copyright], and the NEA served on NNSTOY’s Board of Trustees.⁴¹

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- 34 [¶]Oct. 9, 2014, in *RealClearEducation*. In “Student Achievement Partners' Core Advocate program, . . . educators from across the country work closely with Student Achievement Partners to develop, curate, and review Common Core resources for teachers.” David Coleman, Susan Pimentel and Jason Zimba, lead writers of the Common Core State Standards, founded Student Achievement Partners.
https://www.realeducation.com/articles/2014/10/09/common_core_classroom_perspectives_teachers_carol_burris_1114.html.
- 35 [¶]Jan 8, 2015, in the *Nashville Tennessean*. Hope Street Group funders include the “Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; Blue Shield of California Foundation; City Bridge; Cancer Treatment Centers of America; Foundation for Excellence in Education; Harold K. L. Castle Foundation; Hawaii Community Foundation; The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation; LinkedIn; McNerny Foundation; NewVentureFund; Omidyar Network; OPTUM; Peter G. Peterson Foundation; Rodel Foundation of Delaware; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; VOYA Financial; Walmart Foundation; ALCOA Foundation; The Joyce Foundation.” <https://hopestreetgroup.org/who-we-work-with/funders/>
- 36 [¶]Funding Teach Plus are the “Barr Foundation; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; The Boston Foundation; Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation; Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation; Eli Lilly and Company Foundation; Harold Whitworth Pierce Charitable Trust; The Indianapolis Foundation, a CICF Affiliate; The Joyce Foundation; The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust; The Mind Trust; Moriah Fund; Noyce Foundation; Reeder Foundation; SheGives; Shippy Foundation; W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation; The Walton Family Foundation; Wasserman Foundation.” <https://www.teachplus.org/donate>
- 37 [¶]<https://www.upeducationnetwork.org/about>.
- 38 [¶]July 6, 2016 in *RealClearEducation*
https://www.realeducation.com/articles/2016/07/06/why_states_should_make_parcc_the_foundation_of_new_exams_1295.html?utm_source=PARCC+Updates+7-8-16&utm_campaign=PARCCOnline.org&utm_medium=email
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/emily-griggs-ba42245b>.
- 39 [¶]Josh Parker, *Hechinger Report*, January 5, 2016; Karen Vogelsang, *Nashville Tennessean*, January 8, 2015; Alison Grizzle, Amanda McAdams, Kristie Martorelli, Beth Maloney, John-David Bowman, Ouida Newton, Elizabeth Miner, Jemelleh Coes, Jeff Baxter, Melody Arabo, Angie Miller, Jeff Hinton, James Ford, Lori Michalec, Mike Funkhouser, Terry Kaldhusdal, Amy Traynor, Jane McMahon, Diana Callope, and Mick Wiest, *Education Week*, May 19, 2015.
- 40 <https://www.nnstoy.org/about-us/our-sponsors/>.
- 41 <https://www.nnstoy.org/about-us/board-members/>.

Bellwether’s Tax Returns

“Non profit” organizations can still make money. In the United States, public “charities” with annual revenues over \$50,000 must file a Form 990, “Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax,” with the Internal Revenue Service. A perusal of those from Bellwether Education Partners, Inc. for the tax years 2012 through 2014 reveals much. Tens of millions of dollars flowed through Bellwether’s books each year. Most of it filled staffers’ pockets.⁴²

Bellwether promoted itself as a champion of the less privileged: “professionals dedicated to helping education organizations become more effective... especially for the most underserved students;” and “spearheading transformational approaches to better serve all students, especially those in low-income communities.”⁴³ But, their own salaries hardly resembled those of social workers.

The IRS requires that Form 990s list all staff receiving over \$150,000 in compensation. Bellwether listed ten such staffers for the 2015 tax year, ten for 2014, and eight for 2012. Three staff—Kimberly Smith, Mary K. Wells, and Andy Rotherham—pulled in more than \$250,000 a year. And, remember, all travel and lodging—of which Bellwether staffers partook plenty—was expensed elsewhere in the budget. The most highly-remunerated staff worked in “thought leadership,” “strategic advising,” or “talent services.” Annual bonuses ranged from \$15,000 to \$55,000.

The IRS does not require non-profits to itemize their funding sources, Bellwether did not list its donors on its Form 990s, and its website confusingly mixed donors and clients together—all 330 of them.⁴⁴ So, for details on Bellwether’s donors, one must consult donor documents. Thoroughly searching all possible sources would portend enough work for its own research report. Table 3 shows the amounts from just two—the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation.

Table 3. Donations to Bellwether Education Partners, Inc. from the Gates and Walton Foundations, 2011–2015

Year	Gates	Walton
2015	\$1,626,480	\$262,085
2014		\$1,104,271
2013	\$3,047,333	\$780,339

⁴² Bellwether Form 990s may be found here: [2013](#) [2014](#) [2015](#)

⁴³ <https://bellwethereducation.org/about-us>

⁴⁴ <https://bellwethereducation.org/who-we-work>

2012	\$805,635	\$185,000
2011	\$951,800	\$90,000

How strongly would such funding streams have continued to flow if Bellwether’s efforts had been directed toward more balance in its coverage of the issues these foundations coveted?

In addition to receiving large grants from donors, Bellwether sometimes served as a conduit for grant giving. In 2014, it awarded half-million dollar grants to Deans for Impact, an advocacy group of education school deans, and CoreSpring, a software development firm. As its name implies, CoreSpring software was designed to help end users with Common Core Standards implementation, with item banks that could be used for “formative test” development. Bellwether granted CoreSpring almost \$1.5 million in 2013 and, in 2012, paid the CoreSpring founders about \$450 thousand in contractor fees and an “entrepreneur-in-residence” salary.

Interlocking directorates and Washington, D.C.’s staff for life

In his 1960s classic, *Who Rules America?* (1967), sociologist G. William Domhoff describes the concept and power of interlocking directorates—how powerful individuals sitting on each other’s corporate boards reinforce group norms and protect each other’s interests.⁴⁵ Though created to protect the assets, plans, privileged society, and culture of those inside them, the separation from the outside world created by the castle walls and moats surrounding interlocking directorates isolate the powerful insiders. New, useful and enlightening – but perhaps disruptive – information and resources may not find their way inside the walls. Those inside the walls learn only from each other, from those they know and trust, those they already agreed with before they set themselves apart inside the castle.

With the single exception of their nonprofit status, the interlocking directorates of those who call themselves education reformers resemble Domhoff’s corporate power elite. Directors of one education reform organization can be found sitting on the boards of others (some nonprofits have two or three, e.g. “advisors,” “trustees,” “editorial”) making space at the table for those who sit on multiple boards, and facilitating inter-organizational “strategic partnerships.” Foundations and other donors collaborate extensively, “pack funding” one education reform nonprofit after another. Relatively small nonprofits receive little bits of funding from many, and many of the same, funders.

Many complain about lifetime professional politicians — those who stay in Washington, D.C. long after their peak years. Bellwether’s *RealClearEducation* introduced us to another group — lifetime political staff. Unlike Cincinnatus, the legendary Roman leader who returned to his farm when he felt he had accomplished what he had been invited to Rome to do, some Beltway staffers choose not to return home when their bosses retire, change jobs, or lose an election. Rather, they form or join a think tank, making use of their contacts and experience working D.C.’s hallways and lobbies. These political lifers form the core of many of the groups that Bellwether linked to.

Many of the rest arrived through several familiar career paths. Read the short bios of the writers of the linked articles, and over and over one read that the author worked for Teach for America, did a Broad

45 Domhoff, G.W. (1967). *Who Rules America?* New York: Prentice-Hall.

Residency, worked at the Gates Foundation, or completed a public policy degree. It's a club, an inbred, insular, exclusive club.⁴⁶

Given Washington, D.C.'s magnetic pull on members of this group, it should come as no surprise to hear them so often suggest federal solutions for education problems. The 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution can seem of little interest or concern. When faced with the choice, these people chose to remain in D.C. rather than return home. Federal involvement in education means more work for them there, debating, lobbying, researching, and writing talking points.

Bellwether's preferred education policy organizations were thoroughly interlocked. And so many individuals and groups were involved that no one could be held accountable. Consider this announcement from the Center for Education Policy introducing another new nonprofit:

The organizational partners in TeachStrong are: Alliance for Excellent Education, America Achieves, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, American Federation of Teachers, ASCD, Center for American Progress, Council of Chief State School Officers, Deans for Impact, Digital Promise, Education Post, The Education Trust, the Education Policy Program at New America, Educators 4 Excellence, Educators Rising, Emerson Collective, Hope Street Group, Knowledge Alliance, Leading Educators, Learning Forward, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, National Center for Learning Disabilities, National Center for Teacher Residencies, National Center on Time and Learning, National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, National Council on Teacher Quality, National Education Association, National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, National Network of State Teachers of the Year, National Women's Law Center, New Leaders, New Teacher Center, Public Impact, Relay Graduate School of Education, Stand for Children, Teach For America, Teach Plus, Third Way, TNTP, Urban Teachers, and The VIVA Project.

Is this degree of cooperation good?⁴⁷ How is their cherished innovation even possible when countless organizations run by committees must agree on the same plan? ...when a hundred funders all fund the same thing? ...when all the social entrepreneurs come from the same background? It's the collaboration of a summer picnic sack race.

After reading through page after page of innumerable reports, essays, and blogs from these groups, two aspects stand out: impressive style and deficient substance. Their work — their websites and their publications, for example — looks very professional. Masses of donor funds bestowed upon the smallest, newest, and most narrowly focused of these nonprofits an aura of established institutionalism.

46 [¶]See also: Lofgren, M. (2015, November 2). The “anti-knowledge” of the elites. Moyers & Company. <https://billmoyers.com/2015/11/02/the-anti-knowledge-of-the-elites/#.VjgS4F7oAJU.twitter>
<https://consortiumnews.com/2015/10/31/the-anti-knowledge-of-the-elites/>; Savage, G.C. (2016). Think tanks, education and the elite policy actors. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 43, 35–53.

47 [¶]See also: Lubienski, C, Brewer, T.J., & La Londe, P.G. (2016). Orchestrating policy ideas: Philanthropies and think tanks in US education policy advocacy networks. *Australian Educational Researcher*. 43, 55–73; Petersen, J., & Poulson, S. (2016, June 17). To drive innovation in education, foundations are starting to act like venture capitalists. *Impact Alpha*. <https://impactalpha.com/to-drive-innovation-in-education-foundations-are-starting-to-act-like-venture-capitalists/>

Contrasting the appearance of quality professionalism was a pervasive superficiality of content. Missions were launched based on the findings of one or a few reports from in-group think tanks or advocacy organizations. Reference lists in one group's reports mirrored the reference lists in others'. Vast research literatures, easily accessible from the local library, remained undiscovered, in favor of policy solutions derived from the recommendations of a familiar small group of celebrity researchers.

It can be done better

For over a decade, Madison, Wisconsin's Jim Zellmer has managed Schoolinfosystem.org (SIS), a weekly selection of 50 or so education-related news stories, research articles, and other linked items. He calls it "curated education information" or "curated news and links."

Zellmer's curating is rich in selection, but light in interpretation. Editorial notes are uncommon. Typically, he culls the introduction to a linked piece straight from the text. His editorial contribution rarely extends beyond the title he attaches to the intro.

One detects evidence of personal interests in the selection—in the frequency of links to pieces on Madison and Wisconsin and in mathematics and science, for example. But, if Zellmer has a vested interest in the education business or an ideological bias, I haven't discerned it.

Even less discernable is information about Zellmer himself. I discovered a few bits and pieces about him from internet searches on his name. The SIS web pages, however, say little about him. He was hardly more forthcoming when I interviewed him by email (Phelps, 2016).⁴⁸

Schoolinfosystem.org's weekly selection of *sources* is wide-ranging and multi-sided. Zellmer links to obscure blog posts, scholarly journal articles, public hearings, regulatory announcements, and anything else education-related. Each week's selection provides links to information sources previously unknown to me. With every week's email, I learn something new. Zellmer's work is masterful journalism. Yet, he is not a professional journalist.

In sharp contrast to SIS are the many daily or weekly curated lists of links on education policy that arrive in my inbox from vested interest groups — which select only those pieces that support their interests — or from news outlets, such as *RealClearEducation* and *Politico* — which perceive little of interest beyond the gummy boundaries of the DC edu-blob.

For his part, Jim Zellmer occasionally links to pieces from the tiny group of usual suspects that wholly populate *Politico*'s and *RCE*'s purviews. They are included, but not to the exclusion of the rest of the evidence and opinion humanity has to offer. Zellmer also links to pieces on request; something professional news editors say they don't have enough space to do.

Another essential difference between Schoolinfosystem.org and *RealClearEducation*: SIS selects an article based on what the article has to say; *RCE* often selects an article because of who wrote it, even when it has little to say.

48 Phelps, R.P. (2016, July). Interview with Jim Zellmer of Schoolinfosystem.org *Nonpartisan Education Review / Testimonials*, 12(1). <https://nonpartisaneducation.org/Review/Testimonials/v12n1.pdf>.

When I read *RCE* from the Bellwether era, I feel completely detached from education policy. Bellwether-era *RCE* told me that education policy is the domain of an elite few — a tiny group of aristocrats of which 99 percent of humanity could never hope to be a member.

When I read Jim Zellmer's *SIS*, it seems as though everyone is invited. We all are responsible for education policy and should be concerned about it, and we all can and should participate in policy discussions. *SIS* is not perfect. Personally, I would prefer that Mr. Zellmer provide an even wider range of sources. But, he receives no compensation for what he does, after all, and still he does a far more responsible job than the highly compensated Bellwether staff responsible for *RealClearEducation*.

Conclusion

Summing up the Bellwether-era *RealClearEducation*'s preferences in one table:

U.S. education policy world according to <i>Bellwether Education</i>	Who and What <i>Bellwether Education</i> ignored
political insiders	political outsiders
professionals	volunteers
paid promotions	unpaid appeals
paid staff	more volunteers
funded organizations	independent organizations
Democrats and Republicans	Independents
Washington, D.C. & New York City	most other places (unless a local newspaper supports Common Core)
federal education policy	state and local education policy
think tanks and advocacy group reports	peer-reviewed journal articles
national think tanks	regional think tanks
establishment institutions	grassroots organizations
elites	the rest of us
\$billions and \$billions and...	unfunded parents, teacher, local officials
administrators, political staff	teachers, parents, students
organizations with paid public relations, editorial, IT, and grant-writing staff	Citizens and parents
Harvard, Stanford	most anywhere else
Second tier economists, political scientists	academic content experts, religious leaders, psychologists, education practitioners
a public policy degree	academic experts, direct experience
performance-based tests; constructed-response test items	objective tests; selected-response test items (e.g., multiple-choice)
constructivist classrooms	what works in the classroom

Forget their Beltway-centric outlook for a minute. Let's assume that the Bellwether Education Partners sincerely believe they know how to fix our education system, and they mean well from within the context of that tightly bounded worldview. In its "About Us" web page at the time, Bellwether told us:

Today there is a growing community of education reform leaders, entrepreneurs, organizations, foundations, and public institutions that are spearheading transformational approaches to better serve all students, especially those in low-income communities. These organizations and their supporters are demonstrating the promise of innovative solutions for closing the persistent achievement gap in public education.

Sounds earnest, innocent, and sincere. What could possibly go wrong? Everything goes wrong if they are wrong in their assumptions (and they are in most of them). In Bellwether Partners' certainty that they knew the one true path, they stifled dissent, debate, and discussion, alternative points of view, and contrary evidence.

For those with a traditional faith in American democracy, those who think that we all should be involved in policy discussions because policy facts, data and evidence matters to us all, Bellwether's *RealClearEducation* was not a credible website that served as an honest broker for

education news coverage and commentary. It betrayed the conceit that policy should be left to the professional policy analysts mostly based in Washington, D.C. and the majority of the U.S. population should just be quiet and follow along.

Appendix

Some Bellwether-linked organizations, their funder lists, their board members⁴⁹

With some smaller organizations, grateful for the windfall, funders are prominently posted. Other, more politically wily organizations do not make their funding sources easy to find.

Funders:

50Can – <https://50can.org/about-us/financials/>

The 74 - <https://www.the74million.org/page/supporters>

America Achieves - <https://americaachieves.org/our-funders/>

Catalyst Chicago - <https://catalyst-chicago.org/who-we-are/our-supporters/>

Chalkbeat - <https://www.chalkbeat.org/about/supporters/>

Change the Equation - <https://changetheequation.org/our-members>

Children Now - <https://www.childrennow.org/about-us/funders/>

The Collaborative for School Success - <https://forstudentsuccess.org/about/>

Complete College America - <https://completecollege.org/about-cca/>

Consortium on School Research (U. Chicago) - <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/about/funders-supporters>

EdSource - <https://edsources.org/donors>

Education Cities - <https://educationcities.org/>

Education Delivery Institute - <https://www.deliveryinstitute.org/our-partners>

Education Pioneers - <https://www.educationpioneers.org/who-we-are/funding-support/current-investors>

Educators 4 Excellence - <https://www.educators4excellence.org/about-us/donors/donor-list>

EdVestors - <https://www.edvestors.org/about/current-investors/>

ERStrategies - https://www.erstrategies.org/info/collaborators_and_funders

Generation Ready - <https://www.generationready.com/who-we-are/partners/>

Great Schools Partnership - https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/work/partners_clients/

High Achievement New York - https://www.highachievementny.org/coalition_members

Hope Street Group - <https://hopestreetgroup.org/who-we-work-with/funders/>

iNACOL - <https://www.inacol.org/about/supporters/>

The Institute for College Access and Success - <https://ticas.org/board-members>

KIPP Through College - <https://www.kipp.org/about-kipp/our-organization/national-partners>

Learning First Alliance - <https://www.learningfirst.org/about/>

LearnLaunch Institute - <https://learnlaunch.org/sponsors-and-supporters/>

Level Playing Field Institute - <https://www.lpfi.org/donors/>

National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY) - <https://www.nnstoy.org/about-us/our-sponsors/>

NCAN - <https://www.collegeaccess.org/supporters>

New Classrooms - <https://newclassrooms.org/team.html#funders>

⁴⁹ Other sources of funders and board members of education reform organizations include:

! Schneider, M.K. (2014), *A Chronicle of Echoes: Who's Who in the Implosion of American Education*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

! Vogel, P. (2016, April 27). Here Are The Corporations And Right-Wing Funders Backing The Education Reform Movement: A Guide To The Funders Behind A Tangled Network Of Advocacy, Research, Media, And Profiteering That's Taking Over Public Education. *Media Matters*.
<https://mediamatters.org/research/2016/04/27/here-are-corporations-and-right-wing-funders-backing-education-reform-movement/210054>

! Vander Hart, S. (2016, July 11). The Common Core Matrix. Truth in American Education [blog]
https://truthinamericaneducation.com/common-core-state-standards/common-core-matrix/?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=twitter&utm_source=socialnetwork

New Schools for New Orleans – <https://www.newschoolsforneworleans.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/NSNO-Annual-Update-2014.pdf> (see p.26)
Opportunity Culture Initiative - <https://opportunityculture.org/our-initiative/>
The Opportunity Network - <https://opportunitynetwork.org/support-us/our-supporters/>
Ounce of Prevention Fund - <https://annualreports.theounce.org/2014/>
School Leaders Network - <https://connectleadsucceed.org/contribute/sln-supporters>
Teach Plus - <https://www.teachplus.org/donate>
TeachStrong - <https://www.americanprogress.org/press/release/2015/11/10/125052/release-40-education-organizations-unite-to-launch-teachstrong-a-campaign-to-modernize-and-elevate-the-teaching-profession/>
United Through Reading – <https://www.unitedthroughreading.org/giving/donors/>
Urban Teachers - <https://www.urbanteachers.org/our-supporters/>
Year Up - <https://www.yearup.org/for-employers/current-partners/?location=national-us/>

Board Members:

50Can - <https://www.50can.org/our-states/results#partners>
The 74 - <https://www.the74million.org/page/supporters>
A+ Colorado - <https://www.aplusdenver.org/about/board>
American Federation for Children - <https://www.federationforchildren.org/about-us/leadership/>
Bellwether Education Partners - <https://bellwethereducation.org/our-team>
Black Alliance for Educational Options - <https://edjustice.org/about/board-directors-advisory-board/>
Catalyst Chicago - <https://catalyst-chicago.org/who-we-are/editorial-advisory-board/>
Chalkbeat - <https://www.chalkbeat.org/about/board-of-directors/>
Change the Equation - <https://changetheequation.org/board-directors>
Children Now - <https://www.childrennow.org/about-us/board-directors/>
Complete College America - <https://completecollege.org/about-cca/> (tab: Board)
Consortium on School Research (U Chicago) - <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/about/steering-committee>
EdSource - <https://edsources.org/about-edsources/edsources-board-members>
Education Cities - <https://education-cities.org/who-we-are/our-board/>
Education Delivery Institute - <https://www.deliveryinstitute.org/board>
Education Pioneers - <https://www.educationpioneers.org/who-we-are/our-team>
Education Reform Now - <https://edreformnow.org/about-us/board-of-directors/>
Educators for Excellence - <https://www.educators4excellence.org/about-us/donors/donor-list>
EdVestors - <https://www.edvestors.org/about/governing-board/>
ERStrategies - <https://www.erstrategies.org/info/team#board>
Foundation for Excellence in Education - <https://excelined.org/ExcelinEdBrochure/>
Generation Ready - <https://www.generationready.com/who-we-are/advisory-board/>
Great Schools Partnership - <https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/about/board-of-directors/>
High Achievement New York - https://www.highachievementny.org/about_hany
iNACOL - <https://www.inacol.org/about/board-of-directors/>
The Institute for College Access and Success - <https://ticas.org/board-members>
KIPP Through College – <https://www.kipp.org/about-kipp/our-organization/board-of-directors>
LearnLaunch - <https://learnlaunch.org/about-us/team/>
National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY) - <https://www.nnstoy.org/about-us/board-members/>
NCAN - <https://www.collegeaccess.org/board>
New Classrooms - <https://newclassrooms.org/team.html#directors>
New Schools for New Orleans - <https://www.newschoolsforneworleans.org/who-we-are/our-board/>
Opportunity Culture Initiative - <https://opportunityculture.org/ocat/>
The Opportunity Network - <https://opportunitynetwork.org/about-us/board/>
Ounce of Prevention Fund - <https://www.theounce.org/who-we-are/board-of-directors>
Partnership for Educational Justice - <https://edjustice.org/about/board-directors-advisory-board/>

Roosevelt Institute - <https://rooseveltinstitute.org/roosevelters/#board>
School Leaders Network - <https://connectleadsucceed.org/about-us>
Stand for Children - <https://stand.org/national/about/board-directors>
Strategic Education Research Partnership - <https://serpinstitute.org/researchers.html> &
<https://serpinstitute.org/leadership.html>
Teach Plus - <https://www.teachplus.org/news-events/press-release/representative-george-miller-joins-teach-plus-board-directors>
UndocuScholars - <https://www.undocuscholars.org/advisory-board.html>
United Through Reading - <https://www.unitedthroughreading.org/about-us/board-of-trustees/>
Urban Teachers - <https://www.urbanteachers.org/our-board/>
Washington Center for Equitable Growth - <https://equitablegrowth.org/about/#eg-steering-committee> &
<https://equitablegrowth.org/about/#eg-steering-committee>
Year Up - <https://www.yearup.org/about-us/leadership/?location=national-us/>

Some organizations that did not seem to reveal their funders on their web sites:

A+ Colorado; Black Alliance for Educational Options; Democracy Builders; *Education Post*; Education Reform Now; EdVoice Institute; Families for Excellent Schools; First Focus; LIBRE Initiative; Public Advocates; Stand for Children