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Richard Stengel
Managing Editor
TIME Magazine
By email at rick_stengel@timemagazine.com

November 20, 2012

Dear Mr. Stengel:

I would like to alert you to the frequency that your “School of Thought” commentator, Andrew Rotherham, has written columns on behalf of clients or potential clients of his consulting firm, Bellwether Education Partners.

Between September 9, 2010 and September 28, 2012, Rotherham wrote 110 articles for TIME Magazine’s “School of Thought” column. Out of these articles, more than one third, or 36 percent, promoted one of his firm’s clients or their direct interests.

Moreover, in ten of these articles, or nearly 10 percent, Rotherham failed to mention that the organization or company he was praising was one of Bellwether’s clients, or a for-profit subsidiary owned by a client (*See #3 below*).

We believe Rotherham’s firm financially benefits from his position as a writer for Time.com and that his column helps recruit additional clients who would like to be featured in his column. Bellwether’s website prominently links to all of Rotherham’s “School of Thought” articles, under the heading of “Publications.”¹

His position as a columnist undermines TIME’s reputation for balance. We urge you to replace him with an education columnist who is not riddled with conflicts of interest; or at the very least, he be required to refrain from writing about his clients in future columns.

More on this below.

¹ <<http://bellwethereducation.org/ideas/publications/>>.

Analysis

Of the 110 “School of Thought” columns Rotherham has written for Time Inc.:

- 1.) Seventeen articles, roughly 15 percent, contain a disclosure of his potential conflict of interest at the end of the article.²

Example: *“Disclosure: Of the foundations mentioned in this column, the Broad, Gates and Joyce foundations have funded the author’s work.”*³

Of these seventeen, six are from Rotherham’s annual list promoting the top education activists (“School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011” and “School of Thought: 12 Education Activists for 2012”).⁴ These articles contain disclosures at the end of the entire list of featured individuals, rather than at the end of each segment, requiring readers to click up to nine times later to discover the connection.

For example, while promoting Jonah Edelman, of Stand for Children, readers would not discover Stand for Children is a client of Bellwether’s until four clicks later.⁵ While promoting Senator Michael Bennet of Colorado, the reader would not discover that Rotherham contributed to his campaign until nine clicks later.⁶

² “5 Philanthropy Lessons for Mark Zuckerberg,” September 30, 2010; “Paging Principal Skinner: Evaluating School Leaders,” October 21, 2010; “Will John Boehner Be Good for Education?” November 4, 2010; “Is the Golden Age of Education Spending Over?” December 9, 2010; “The 5 Biggest Myths About School Vouchers,” February 17, 2011; “Better Teachers: More Questions Than Answers,” April 21, 2011; “Actually, College Is Very Much Worth It,” May 19, 2011; “Quiet Riot: Insurgents Take On Teachers’ Unions,” August 11, 2011; “Can Education Be ‘Moneyball’-ed?” October 14, 2011; “Getting the Best Info on a Potential New School,” March 10, 2011; “Why One Innovator is Leaving the Public Sector,” March 23, 2011; “School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--Michael Bennet: The Senator,” January 6, 2011; “School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--Kristin Richmond and Kirsten Tobey: The Foodies,” January 6, 2011; “School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--Wendy Kopp: The Teacher Trainer,” January 6, 2011; “School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--Jonah Edelman: The Activist,” January 6, 2011; “School of Thought: 12 Education Activists for 2012-- John Danner: The Tech Guy,” January 11, 2012; “School of Thought: 12 Education Activists for 2012-- Aimee Guidera: The Data Driver,” January 11, 2012.

³ “5 Philanthropy Lessons for Mark Zuckerberg,” September 20, 2010.

⁴ “School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--Michael Bennet: The Senator,” January 6, 2011; “School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--Kristin Richmond and Kirsten Tobey: The Foodies,” January 6, 2011; “School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--Wendy Kopp: The Teacher Trainer,” January 6, 2011; “School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--Jonah Edelman: The Activist,” January 6, 2011; “School of Thought: 12 Education Activists for 2012-- John Danner: The Tech Guy,” January 11, 2012; “School of Thought: 12 Education Activists for 2012-- Aimee Guidera: The Data Driver,” January 11, 2012.

⁵ “School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--Jonah Edelman: The Activist,” January 6, 2011

⁶ “School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--Michael Bennet: The Senator,” January 6, 2011; “School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--Michelle Rhee: The Radical,” January 6, 2011.

- 2.) In thirteen articles, an additional 12 percent, there are no clearly stated disclosures at the end of the piece, but instead mention the author's financial or personal connections only in passing, mid-text.⁷

Example: "Erin Dillon of Education Sector, a policy think tank I co-founded, concluded in a 2008..." and "My nonprofit firm, for instance, is full of them — one of my partners helped launch TFA —."⁸

- 3.) In **ten additional articles**, roughly 9 percent, Rotherham omitted any mention of his firm's financial connection with key clients.⁹

Example: In 2011, Rotherham wrote **four separate articles** featuring or citing studies from The New Teacher Project (TNTP).¹⁰ In none of these articles did Rotherham mention any connection with the organization. However, as Bellwether's website has stated since July 31, 2010, "Mary K. Wells is a co-founder and partner at Bellwether Education Partners....Recent clients include ... the New Teacher Project."¹¹ (Wells has worked with Bellwether since its launch in 2008 and is also one of five members of their Board of Directors.)

Example: In August of 2011, Rotherham wrote an article pointing out the merits of school choice.¹² This article did not contain any disclosure. Yet six months prior, he wrote another piece on school choice, while revealing that he was on the advisory

⁷ "Waiting for 'Superman': Education Reform Isn't Easy," October 2, 2010; "Charter Schools: The Good Ones Aren't Flukes," October 14, 2010; "Teach for America: 5 Myths That Persist 20 Years On," February 2, 2010; "KIPP Schools: A Reform Triumph, or Disappointment?" April 27, 2011; "Backlash: Are These End Times for Charter Schools?" June 9, 2011; "Teachers' \$500 Billion (and Growing) Pension Problem," November 11, 2011; "Does Income-Based School Integration Work?" October 28, 2010; "Who Is Best Qualified to Run a School System?" November 18, 2010; "Dropout Rates Dropping, but Don't Celebrate Yet," November 30, 2010; "Rating Teachers: The Trouble with Value-Added Data," September 23, 2010; "When It Comes To Class Size, Smaller Isn't Always Better," March 3, 2011; "Why Romney's Big School Voucher Idea Is Really Pretty Puny," June 14, 2012; "What Everyone Missed on the Pineapple Question," May 4, 2012.

⁸ "Does Income-Based School Integration Work?" October 28, 2010; "Teach for America: 5 Myths That Persist 20 Years On," February 2, 2011.

⁹ "Blame Game: Let's Talk Honestly About Bad Teachers," October 20, 2011; "School of Thought: 12 Education Activists for 2012-- Ariela Rozman: The Operator," January 11, 2012; "Beyond Unions: Five New Rules for Teachers," February 24, 2011; "Super Bowl School: What the NFL Can Teach Teachers," February 3, 2011; "Back-to-School Special: 5 Tips on Picking a Good School," August 4, 2011; "New Grades On Charter Schools," November 3, 2011; "Charter Schools: The Good Ones Aren't Flukes," October 14, 2010; "School of Thought: 12 Education Activists for 2012-- Maggie Gyllenhaal: The Star," January 11, 2012; "Can Parents Take Over Schools?" March 8, 2012; "Won't Back Down: Why This Education Movie Matters," September 28, 2012.

¹⁰ "Blame Game: Let's Talk Honestly About Bad Teachers," October 20, 2011; "School of Thought: 12 Education Activists for 2012-- Ariela Rozman: The Operator," January 11, 2012; "Beyond Unions: Five New Rules for Teachers," February 24, 2011; "Super Bowl School: What the NFL Can Teach Teachers," February 3, 2011;

¹¹ <<http://bellwethereducation.org/people/team/#wells>>. We found this date using WayBack Machine.

¹² "Back-to-School Special: 5 Tips on Picking a Good School," August 4, 2011.

board for the School Choice Demonstration Project, *"Disclosure: Andrew J. Rotherham is on the advisory and review boards for the School Choice Demonstration Project"*¹³

Example: In **two articles**, Rotherham noted the merits of KIPP, but did not disclose that the KIPP Foundation has been a client of Bellwether since at least July 23, 2010.¹⁴

In October 2010, he wrote: *"... the best charter schools ...significantly and consistently outperform the averages, and they have a lot in common with each other in their ethos and operations. There is also solid evidence that their successes can be reproduced and scaled up in networks such as KIPP (99 schools in 20 states)...."*¹⁵

In November 2011, he again praised KIPP without disclosing that it is a Bellwether client: *"The success of KIPP, which has grown to more than 100 schools KIPP has become to charter schools what Coke is to soft drinks"*¹⁶

Example: In 2012, Rotherham has written **three separate articles** promoting the controversial film "Won't Back Down," that was critically panned by most movie critics.¹⁷ The movie is distributed by Fox films, a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, and the film promotes the use of the "Parent Trigger" which allows a parent petition drive to turn a public school into a charter school.

Not only did Rotherham fail to mention his relationship with any of numerous charter organizations that could benefit from the adoption of the "Parent Trigger", but he also omitted disclosing that one of the Bellwether's clients is Wireless Generation, a subsidiary of News Corporation, the distributor of the film.¹⁸

- 4.) Even when Rotherham is not promoting one of his clients, it is evident that potential clients may be attracted to his firm, either to reward him for the

¹³ *"The 5 Biggest Myths About School Vouchers,"* February 17, 2011.

¹⁴ *New Grades On Charter Schools,"* November 3, 2011; *Charter Schools: The Good Ones Aren't Flukes ,"* October 14, 2010. We found this information using WayBack Machine.

¹⁵ *Charter Schools: The Good Ones Aren't Flukes ,"* October 14, 2010.

¹⁶ *"New Grades On Charter Schools,"* November 3, 2011. At other times, when he did include a disclosure, he did not fully explain the extent to which his company has a professional stake in KIPP. Example: In April 27, 2011 article, while praising KIPP, he slipped in the fact that the charter chain is a client: "Bolstered by substantial philanthropic support — KIPP schools collectively raise about \$40 million a year and Gap founders Doris and Don Fisher have given \$65 million to the network over the last ten years — KIPP now operates elementary, middle, and high schools that all focus on helping low-income students graduate from college. In other words KIPP, **which one of my colleagues has helped with leadership recruiting**, (emphasis added) is basically a midsize school district — albeit one that is not geographically contiguous." *"KIPP Schools: A Reform Triumph, or Disappointment?"* April 27, 2011.

¹⁷ *"School of Thought: 12 Education Activists for 2012-- Maggie Gyllenhaal: The Star"* January 11, 2012; *"Can Parents Take Over Schools?"* March 8, 2012; *"Won't Back Down': Why This Education Movie Matters,"* September 28, 2012.

¹⁸ <<http://bellwethereducation.org/people/who-we-work-with/>>

publicity he has already provided them, or in hope that he will promote their efforts in future column.

Example: In his “11 Education Activists for 2011” list, Rotherham wrote two articles, one praising the founder of StudentsFirst, Michelle Rhee, and another praising one of StudentsFirst’s founding board members, David Coleman. At the end of the article, which also the end of the section about Rhee, he added, “*And while we don't yet formally work with Rhee's new organization, Bellwether's niche is unique enough that we're likely to in the future.*”¹⁹

- 5.) This summary may not be an exhaustive list of Rotherham’s potential conflicts of interest, because the client list on Bellwether’s “Who We Work With” page seems to have omissions.

Example: In a May 4, 2012 article in which he defended the Pearson company for the infamous “Pineapple” questions on the NYS exam, he wrote: “*In this instance Pearson (a company for which I have done a small amount of consulting) ...*”²⁰

Bellwether’s “Who We Work With” page, however, has never listed Pearson as a client and does not do so to this day.²¹

Background:

Bellwether Education Partners, originally formed in 2007 with the name “Connect the Dots, Inc.,” re-launched in 2008 under the name “ConnectEd Partners, Inc” with revenue of \$483,243 between September 2008-2009. The following year, 2009-2010, the organization changed its name and added Rotherham as its highest-compensated staff member. The firm’s total revenue increased to \$1.7 million and had at least 41 organizations listed as clients, up from 10 in the previous year, according to its IRS 990 Form.

Rotherham had begun writing his “School of Thought” column in September 2010. In the next calendar year (September 2010-2011), Bellwether’s total revenue sharply increased by nearly six times, to \$6,565,077. Rotherham’s total compensation package doubled from \$120,029 in Bellwether’s third year, to \$295,759 in its fourth. The company’s 990 states,

“During the fourth year of operations, Bellwether Education Partners, Inc was able to increase their impact by reaching 42 organizations for executive search and consulting services; offering leadership development programs to 70+”

¹⁹ *School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--David Coleman: The Architect,* January 6, 2011; *School of Thought: 11 Education Activists for 2011--Michelle Rhee: The Radical,* January 6, 2011.

²⁰ *“What Everyone Missed on the Pineapple Question,”* May 4, 2012.

²¹ <<http://bellwethereducation.org/people/who-we-work-with/>>. We found this information using WayBack Machine.

leaders of key reform organizations through direct service programs; as well as countless others through publications on key issues regarding innovation and reform, including our Eduwonk blog.”

Conclusion:

As we have shown above, more than one third of the pieces Andrew Rotherham has written for TIME magazine feature the clients of his consulting company, Bellwether Associates, and/or promote their direct business interests. Many of his clients are charter companies, or organizations that financially benefit from privatization and the expansion of standardized testing, which he touts as strategies to improve our schools.

Some of his clients are identified in his columns as such, some of them are not. In any case, he uses his column to regularly endorse their perspective and promote their interests.

There is an intense controversy raging throughout this country about the wisdom and value of privatization, the current trend to outsource education to corporate hands, and the use of standardized testing as a way to evaluate, reward and punish teachers and schools. It is no coincidence that Rotherham and many of his clients endorse this point of view, and benefit financially from the expansion of these policies.

We urge you to replace Rotherham with another columnist who could be trusted to be more objective; or at the very least, that he should be required to regularly report to you his updated list of clients, while promising to refrain from featuring any of them in future columns.

I await your response.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leonie Haimson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Leonie Haimson
Executive Director

CC: Noah E Gotbaum, Community Education Council District 3.