

## How reform-friendly is Albany?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	20 of 26	11 of 25	6 of 24	20 of 25	25 of 26	24 of 25

### Overview

Which American cities are most hospitable to education reform, especially the “entrepreneurial” kind? To answer this question for Albany and other cities examined in this study, we used publicly available data, national and local surveys, and interviews conducted with on-the-ground insiders.<sup>1</sup> Respondents provided information about the city environment as a whole as well as the City School District of Albany.<sup>2</sup> Judgments based upon these data, however, are the responsibility of the authors. Note, too, that due to the study’s timing, any major policy changes that cities (or states) may have made in connection with the *Race to the Top* competition are not captured in these rankings (but see sidebar for partial update).

### Background

As the capital of New York State, **Albany** is exposed to a larger education-reform conversation than many other cities in this report. Unfortunately, this exposure does little to advance reforms or reformers in the city itself, which is home to a particularly recalcitrant school district, and has limited access to local or

imported talent. The city has benefited from the heroic efforts of the philanthropic community, which has worked to increase the number of high-quality charter schools in particular. Still, this has been an uphill battle, and the charter sector alone is not enough to overcome Albany’s other shortcomings.

### Race to the Top update: New York—New York City

New York applied for round 1 of Race to the Top funding and was selected as a finalist, but ultimately did not win. The state reapplied for round 2 and was again named a finalist. In advance of the competition, legislators passed measures that: establish new teacher and principal evaluation protocols that allow for 40 percent of each evaluation to be based on student growth; raise the charter cap from 200 schools to 460 schools, with the provision that only 114 of the new schools can be located in New York City; allow financial audits of charter schools by the state comptroller; hold charter schools more responsible for enrolling and serving special needs students; and create a statewide charter school enrollment application.

1. This analysis examines the reform environments in the nation’s twenty-five largest cities, plus five additional smaller communities. We reasoned that, as alleged “hotbeds” of reform, these five would permit comparisons of conditions in big cities with those of smaller but potentially more nimble locales. In addition to Albany, NY, these smaller cities include Gary, IN; New Orleans, LA; Newark, NJ; and Washington, D.C. Our analysis of Albany was limited by a low response rate on the national stakeholder survey; therefore, those responses were not calculated into the rankings or final grade (see Appendix A for Methodology). Still, we include here information from the national survey responses that we did receive as well as publicly available data, local survey responses, and interviews.

2. This profile provides a snapshot of the data collected for Albany, New York, in fall 2009. For the full data, see [http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news\\_americas-best-and-worst-cities-for-school-reform](http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_americas-best-and-worst-cities-for-school-reform).

## Snapshot

Albany's **human capital** pipelines are narrow. The city lacks a local pool of education-reform talent, and recruitment from outside is difficult. As the state capital, Albany's workforce is comprised mainly of government employees, which encourages bureaucratic complacency (while upwardly skewing the population's average age). Albany is home to no brand name alternative certification programs; in fact, the closest alt-cert route of any kind is nearly an hour away in Saratoga Springs at Empire State College.<sup>3</sup> Teachers also labor under a highly restrictive collective bargaining agreement.

**Financial capital** pipelines also have limited capacity in Albany. The City School District of Albany (CSDA) spends an impressive amount per pupil when normed for cost of living. However, it has neither a coherent vision for those funds nor a willingness to spend on nontraditional providers or initiatives. National and local philanthropic dollars help make up the void. In the end, however, Albany's small size puts it at a disadvantage in real dollar terms against other cities in this report.

On the positive side, Albany's **charter environment** is healthy. New York law allows for multiple authorizers and holds them accountable for maintaining comprehensive and transparent application, monitoring, and review processes.<sup>4</sup> Charters are also reasonably well supported at the local level: Charter support organizations provide ample support, and the authorizer which oversees most local charters—the State University of New York—keeps an eye on quality when selecting and monitoring its schools. Still, Albany charters—and others across the Empire State—face significant hurdles obtaining facilities funding, as such funds are not adequately allocated by the state.

Outside of the charter sector, Albany's **quality-control** metrics are underwhelming. The state's data systems are fairly robust, but New York does not present its data in a user-friendly manner, which makes it difficult for those on the ground to use them.<sup>5</sup>

The **district environment** within CSDA leaves nontraditional providers wholly wanting. Not only are district leaders hostile toward reform, but the district's procurement office is not well managed or responsive. The district fails to support smart problem-solvers—favoring tenure over talent—and does not communicate a sense of urgency about reform. The teachers' union is also quite powerful and thoroughly change-averse.

Albany's **municipal environment** also leaves much to be desired. The editorial pages of the *Albany Times Union* tend either to support the status quo and/or come out against nontraditional reforms. Municipal leaders, too, seem unwilling to expend political capital on behalf of new education ideas. Though the local business and philanthropic communities are more willing to stick out their respective necks, especially in the charter sector, the city is not, as a whole, a receptive environment for entrepreneurs.

3. State alternative certification routes listed with the National Center for Alternative Certification, [www.teach-now.org](http://www.teach-now.org).

4. For more information, see: *How State Charter Laws Rank Against the New Model Public Charter School Law* (Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2010).

5. For more information, see: *2009-10 Survey Results Compendium—10 Elements and 10 Actions* (Washington, D.C.: Data Quality Campaign, 2010), [http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Elements\\_Compendium.pdf](http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Elements_Compendium.pdf) and [http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Actions\\_Compendium.pdf](http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Actions_Compendium.pdf).

## Bottom Line

Albany is home to a vibrant and growing charter sector, but a recalcitrant district and tepid municipal environment do not provide education entrepreneurs with proper support.

### Our Categories

**Human Capital.** Entrepreneurs must have access to a steady flow of talented individuals, whether to staff the organization's central office or to fill the district's classrooms. This component evaluates an entrepreneur's ability to find talent in the city and/or recruit talent to move there. We examined such factors as the alternative certification routes for aspiring teachers, district human resource policies for teachers and central office staff, and the restrictiveness of the local collective bargaining agreement as it pertains to tenure and differentiated pay, among other areas.

**Financial Capital.** A pipeline of readily accessible funding from private and public sources is particularly important for nonprofit organizations trying to break into a new market or scale up their operations. This component tests whether, and how much, national and local philanthropic organizations give to nontraditional providers in each city, as well as the local availability of dollars from public sources. Though education reformers often tout the importance of quality over quantity, from the perspective of an entrepreneur, free-flowing dollars are an asset.

**Charter Environment.** Charters are one of the main ways in which entrepreneurs can enter new education markets, both as providers of instruction and services and as consumers of other nontraditional goods and services. We evaluated both the current market share of charters in each city—under the assumption that, once a path has been blazed by others, it is easier for new providers to follow it—as well as the various legal and policy hurdles faced by current or potential charter operators. More formal barriers often occur on the state level (e.g., charter laws) so, where appropriate, we incorporated state-level metrics into city grades.

**Quality Control.** Lest we unduly credit innovation for its own sake, the study takes into account the quality-control metrics that guide and regulate entrepreneurial ventures in our cities. These may take the form of official regulations and practices, such as the quality of the state achievement test (again, we extrapolate state grades for our cities), or more informal guides, such as support organizations for nontraditional providers that also keep an eye on quality, such as private groups that help entrepreneurs to navigate district rules and policies.

**District Environment.** Since many nontraditional providers must contract or otherwise work with the district to do business in the city, finding a district that is both open to nontraditional reforms and has the organizational capacity to handle dealings with such operators in a speedy and professional manner can make or break an entrepreneur's forays into a new market. We considered formal barriers, such as the power of the local teachers' union over district decisions, as well as informal ones, such as whether district leaders were audible voices for reform.

**Municipal Environment.** Beyond the school district is also the question of general municipal openness to nontraditional education providers. This amorphous sphere includes such entities as the local business community, newspaper editorial boards, and the city government. Having these folks on the side of reform, even if they are not the ultimate consumer of entrepreneurs' wares, can be a powerful asset.