

How reform-friendly is Austin?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	7 of 26	5 of 25	13 of 24	4 of 25	4 of 26	12 of 25

Overview

Which American cities are most hospitable to education reform, especially the “entrepreneurial” kind? To answer this question for Austin and other cities examined in this study, we used publicly available data, national and local surveys, and interviews conducted with on-the-ground insiders. Respondents provided information about the city environment as a whole as well as the Austin Independent School District.¹ 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

Austin performed admirably according to our metrics. Readers may be surprised that Austin bested Houston (though the margin is slight), but the city’s philanthropies, especially, are a driving force for change through their collaboration with the Austin Independent School District (AISD). An influx of

national philanthropic dollars has further accelerated education reform. AISD, though it serves the majority of Austin’s students, is just one of several districts within the city, and there is little coordination or collaboration between them, or between any of the districts and the city government.²

Race to the Top Update: Texas—Austin

Texas did not apply for either round of Race to the Top funding. Indeed, Texas governor Rick Perry has been a vocal critic of the competition, citing it as an example of federal overreach.

Snapshot

Austin’s decent **human capital** performance would have been better were it not for AISD policies that prize tenure over talent. The city also has limited penetration by national programs—for example, it hosts The New Teacher Project (Texas Teaching Fellows), but not Teach For America. On the plus side, Austin is served by Region XIII Education Service Center, which has an alternative certification program. But the diffused nature of school governance in the city—multiple districts that don’t work together—means there’s no overarching vision for human capital development, which likely leads to the under-utilization of talent.

1. This profile provides a snapshot of the data collected for Austin, Texas, in fall 2009. For the full data, see http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_american-best-and-worst-cities-for-school-reform.

2. Austin Independent School District serves about 80,000 students of 300,000 in the entire Austin metro area.

Financial capital is robust if also disjointed in Austin. The city received high marks in this category, and AISD is aggressive in pursuing reform dollars. But investments tend to be isolated, since area districts don't work together. National respondents report that AISD leadership is proactive in seeking national dollars to further its reform ambitions, and that those dollars do support innovative ideas. But, as in many places, there is no city-wide vision for how to use funds strategically. Local respondents, especially, would like to see philanthropies collaborating with multiple districts on similar initiatives.

Austin has a respectable **charter environment**. Unlike some other cities in Texas, charters receive little district or city government support here, and the relationship between AISD and the charter schools within its boundaries has been rocky. All of the charter schools in Austin (which mostly serve AISD students, though enrollment is not restricted by district boundaries) are authorized by the state. (This could be beneficial, however, since Texas district-sponsored schools tend to have less autonomy and less impressive results than their state-authorized brethren.) Texas's charter law does not ensure equitable funding for these schools, and oversight for charter authorizers is mediocre.³ On a more positive note, non-district support for charter schools in Austin is promising, particularly from the philanthropic sector.

Quality control is also a relatively strong area, for AISD at least. The district, which does not have a long history of solid quality-control metrics, recently adopted a new strategic plan that sets measurable achievement outcomes for students. At the state level, Texas's data system is of good quality and the state has done much to integrate that system with systems at the district level.⁴ The state test, however, is not particularly rigorous when compared to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).⁵

AISD's **district environment** is headed in the right direction. It benefits from a weak teachers' union, which means that the district has the purview and power to implement reforms. Local and national respondents describe a district led by individuals—Pascal “Pat” Forgione for many years, now Meria Carstarphen—who are outspoken in their support of reform and where nontraditional providers find it easy to set up shop.

Vocal support from the business, philanthropic, and even nonprofit communities boosts Austin's **municipal environment**. The city also benefits from the presence of the Texas Institute for Education Reform, a state-level advocacy organization. Though AISD's Carstarphen has made collaboration with the philanthropic, business, and nonprofit communities one of her priorities, entrepreneurs will still have to deal with numerous un-collaborative districts if they wish to take their reforms to scale. The city government has little to do with education and is not a vehicle for reform.

3. 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).

4. 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 and http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Actions_Compendium.pdf.

5. For more information, see: Victor Bandeira de Mello, Charles Blankenship, Don McLaughlin, and Taslima Rahman, *Mapping State Proficiency Standards onto NAEP Scales: 2005-2007 (NCES 2010-456)* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, October 2009), <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/studies/2010456.asp>.

Bottom Line

Austin should be on an entrepreneur's short list of new locales: It finishes in the top twelve in most categories that we examined. With strong funding avenues, and respectable district environs and quality-control metrics, the city is a mostly welcoming host to nontraditional providers.

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 pertained 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.