How reform-friendly is Baltimore?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	11 of 26	17 of 25	21 of 24	24 of 25	12 of 26	20 of 25

Overview

Which American cities are most hospitable to education reform, especially the "entrepreneurial" kind? To answer this question for Baltimore 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 Baltimore City Public Schools.[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

The school reform conversation in **Baltimore** in 2010 revolves around one man: Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) CEO Andres Alonso. Alternately described as a whirlwind for change and overbearingly authoritarian, Alonso has led recent and dramatic efforts to improve district schools, and positive "buzz" created by him has drawn new providers and reform-minded philanthropies to the scene. Unfortunately, Alonso's bold leadership runs up against a recalcitrant bureaucracy and hostile local teachers' union, which together can retard or even block much-needed reform.

Race to the Top Update: Maryland—Baltimore

Maryland did not apply for round 1 of Race to the Top, but did apply for round 2 and was chosen as a finalist. Legislation passed in advance of the competition overhauled teacher compensation policies: Student progress is now to account for 50 percent of teacher evaluations; teacher tenure can only be acquired after three rather than two years; and teachers working in the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in the state can earn differentiated pay (although this clause hinges on the state winning RTT funds).

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

Snapshot

Though Baltimore's **human capital** pipeline is in respectable shape, a strong union threatens to clog it up. The city hosts three national alternative certification programs—Teach For America, which has placed corps members in Baltimore since 1992; The New Teacher Project (Baltimore City Teaching Residency); and New Leaders for New Schools. Unfortunately, a restrictive union contract means that talent is not deployed in the most efficient manner; tenure, not quality, dominates teacher staffing decisions.[2]

Financial capital in Baltimore suffers from a lack of national philanthropic interest. BCPS per-pupil expenditures are average among cities in this analysis, and local philanthropies ensure that nontraditional reforms get their fair share of dollars. But the city does not attract much attention from national donors. Alonso's personality may be at the root of this dynamic: Though he has a purposeful plan for the city, his top-down approach may alienate outside funders.

The **charter environment** in Baltimore is mixed. On the one hand, Maryland has no charter cap, and survey respondents report that charter funding is not impossible to obtain. Yet state law only allows local education agencies to act as authorizers (and the state board of education in rare circumstances) and provides little support for and oversight of authorizers.[3] Charter oversight at the local level is equally spotty. BCPS is selective in choosing which schools to approve—but it is somewhat less quality-minded about intervening in those that struggle or fail. (It recently denied a charter renewal for the first time.)

Quality control is certainly not Baltimore's strong suit. This is partly a consequence of weak state data systems and a mediocre statewide assessment.[4] Further, the quality control mechanisms that exist in the city are not used well. Guidance inside and outside of BCPS is insufficient for nontraditional providers attempting to navigate finances, facilities, and regulatory guidelines.

Baltimore's **district environment** benefits from its bold leadership but is tinged by inefficient operations and a reform-averse local teachers' union. Alonso and his team communicate a sense of urgency about reform, make bold decisions, and currently enjoy the political backing they need to make changes happen. But management of the central office is often sluggish and unresponsive. This, combined with an influential and recalcitrant union, can pose significant obstacles to nontraditional providers.

Baltimore's **municipal environment** also has pros and cons. While local philanthropic and business communities are supportive and willing to expend political capital to fortify that support, the mayor's office does not engage deeply in education reform. Further, the editorial pages of the *Baltimore Sun* offer but tepid support when it comes to nontraditional reforms—though the media as a whole appear more reform-friendly.

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2. For more information, see: National Council on Teacher Quality, *Teacher Rules, Roles and Rights (TR3)* database, http://www.nctq.org/tr3/home.jsp.

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. See also: 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

Baltimore provides a lukewarm reception for nontraditional providers. Though the city enjoys the support of a dynamic CEO and generous philanthropic community, an inefficient school district, coupled with a strong union and disinterested municipal government, means that this community places significant hurdles before entrepreneurs.

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.