

How reform-friendly is Boston?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	10 of 26	12 of 25	15 of 24	10 of 25	26 of 26	6 of 25

Overview

Which American cities are most hospitable to education reform, especially the “entrepreneurial” kind? To answer this question for Boston and other cities examined in this study, we used publicly available data, national and local surveys, and interviews conducted with on-the-ground insiders.¹ Respondents provided information about the city environment as a whole as well as the Boston Public Schools.² 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

Massachusetts is well known for its taut embrace of standards-based reform, with very positive academic results to show for it. But what about Boston itself, and education entrepreneurship? The latter has been slower to take hold, but there are signs that the reform stars are aligning in Beantown. Boston Public Schools (BPS), having enjoyed the decade-long tenure of well-regarded superintendent Thomas Payzant, is now headed by the energetic leader Carol Johnson. This spring, Governor Deval

Patrick, once a stumbling block to the state’s charter-school movement, was prompted by the Race to the Top competition to support legislative changes (see sidebar). Locals report that the reform climate in Boston has improved as a result of these changes: “There’s a window of opportunity,” one said, “a different smell in the air...broad trends are changing.” One can only hope.

Race to the Top update: Massachusetts—Boston

Massachusetts applied for round 1 of Race to the Top funding and was chosen as a finalist, but lost. It reapplied for round 2 and was named a finalist. In January 2010, legislators passed a bill that created a “smart cap” on charter schools (which increased the funding available for charters in low-performing districts and got rid of the state’s charter enrollment cap); provided for Innovation Schools (in-district quasi-charters); and delineated procedures for how superintendents can take over failing schools.

1. Our analysis of Boston was limited by a low response rate on the local stakeholder survey; therefore, those responses were not calculated into the rankings or grade (see Appendix A for Methodology). Still, we include here information from the local survey responses that we did receive as well as publicly available data, national survey responses, and interviews.

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

Snapshot

Boston's **human capital** pipelines are average, but not because of “average” talent in the city. National respondents report that Beantown has plenty of smart, capable folks to staff classrooms, and recent research confirms this sentiment.³ Still the city receives low marks due to meager penetration of brand name alternately trained teachers and principals. It took a highly publicized battle with the Boston Teachers Union in spring 2009 before Teach For America could install its first Boston cadre, now numbering just twenty. That said, BPS has its own well recognized alternative route to licensure, the Boston Teacher Residency, which trains pre-service teachers alongside experienced mentors.

Financial capital is not hard to come by in Boston. Respondents indicate that the city gets its fair share of philanthropic dollars to advance nontraditional reforms. In addition, Boston Public Schools maintains fairly high per-pupil expenditures compared to other cities in this analysis, and is willing both to spend its own money on nontraditional reforms and to seek outside funding to advance them.

Boston's **charter environment** could stand some improvement. The city hosts a number of high-performing charter schools, such as Roxbury Prep, MATCH, and Edward W. Brooke, and the state's single authorizer, the state board of education (SBE), is known for being particularly selective. BPS also has over twenty “pilot schools” which enjoy more autonomy than do traditional schools. Still, SBE's selectivity, combined with a restrictive charter law, make entrance into the Bay State charter market quite difficult.⁴

Boston's strongest performance in the **quality-control** component is the caliber of its state test, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), whose rigor rivals that of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).⁵ The state's overall data system, however, is less impressive. Though it has many of the essential elements of a strong data system, such as the ability to track individual students' scores from year to year, the state has yet to present the data in a user-friendly way or to link its multiple data systems together.⁶

Boston's **district environment** presents a stumbling block to entrepreneurs. The takeaway is this: Actions speak louder than words. The district speaks out for education reform, but it has done little to advance significant change. This is partially due to the style of the superintendent—passionate, but less hard-hitting—as well as the undue sway the teachers' union holds over district decisions.

3. See the National Council on Teacher Quality's *Human Capital in Boston Public Schools: Attracting and Retaining Effective Teachers* (Washington, D.C., 2010). It found that two-thirds of new teachers hired in Boston in 2008-2009 attended “more selective” or “most selective” colleges, as ranked by *U.S. News & World Report*.

4. That said, the quite restrictive statewide charter cap was lifted in January 2010 (after our data collection period). Unfortunately, a number of restrictions remain: The state still caps *by district*, and though this was partly ameliorated by doubling the allotment (from 9 to 18 percent of students) in low-performing districts, SBE only authorizes two to three schools a year. So opening a charter school in Massachusetts, even in Boston—which is considered a low-performing district—is still difficult.

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>.

6. 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.

Support for education reform in the **municipal environment** is much more promising. The philanthropic and business communities are willing to speak out for education reform, as is the mayor, of course, since he (Tom Menino) has mayoral control of schools. Boston also boasts reform-friendly media; the editorial pages of the *Boston Globe* typically support charter schools, alternative certification, and performance-based pay.

Bottom Line

Boston is a middling locale for education entrepreneurship. City leadership is dynamic and strong; funding avenues are relatively wide; and the city's human capital pipelines and charter sector are improving. But charter authorizing policies, state data systems, and the district environment in Boston Public Schools all need more of a reform makeover.

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.