

How reform-friendly is Columbus?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	23 of 26	9 of 25	22 of 24	16 of 25	15 of 26	5 of 25

Overview

Which American cities are most hospitable to education reform, especially the “entrepreneurial” kind? To answer this question for Columbus 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 Columbus City 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

As the state capital, Columbus incorporates state and local education conversations. The state conversation around education reform is often less favorable than the one occurring in the city of Columbus, which means that the latter has a positive effect on the former, but not so much the other way around.

Compared to other cities in this report, Columbus City Schools (CCS) is moderately supportive of reform. The same can be said of the local teachers’ union and the state’s charter law. The presence of state-level education advocacy organizations working in the district’s backyard is a plus for Columbus, but they face an uphill battle against entrenched interest groups and fierce defenders of local control.

Race to the Top Update: Ohio—Columbus

Ohio applied for round 1 of Race to the Top funding and was chosen as a finalist, but ultimately lost. The state reapplied for round 2 and was again chosen as a finalist. In preparation for the competition, Ohio passed legislation that establishes a P-16 longitudinal data system.

Snapshot

Columbus’s poor performance in **human capital** has multiple causes. The city has no national alternative certification programs (Teach For America, The New Teacher Project, or New Leaders for New Schools). CCS also operates under a restrictive collective bargaining agreement,² which combines with retrograde personnel practices to keep talented individuals out of city classrooms. Survey respondents report that it is difficult to recruit talented individuals to move to Ohio, even though Columbus is relatively attractive compared to other locales in the state. Strict state teacher licensure rules likely play a part; even if one wishes to get licensed in the Buckeye State, she or he will have a hard time doing so.

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

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

Columbus fares adequately in terms of **financial capital**. The city benefits from both local and national philanthropic support, though neither of those sources gives a significant amount to education. The per-pupil expenditures in CCS rival those of other districts in this analysis.

The **charter environment** is a mixed bag. The state allows many entities other than school districts to authorize schools, but the state charter cap situation is highly restrictive.³ State law also does not allow charter schools equitable access to operational, capital, and facilities funding.⁴ Funding for charters at the city level is not much better. But several non-district entities provide support and/or advocacy for charter schools, including the Ohio branch of the Fordham Institute and the Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Quality-control mechanisms in Columbus are middling. At the state level, Ohio has most of the components in place for a strong statewide data system,⁵ but the rigor of the state test falls well below that of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).⁶ The metrics that CCS has in place to assess the quality of programs and services do not hinder how entrepreneurs operate—but neither do they help them.

Columbus's **district environment** is best described as middling compared with other cities in this report. There is an influential and not very reform-minded teachers' union in the city, which co-exists alongside a somewhat reform-friendly CCS. District leaders are not powerful voices for reform, but do open doors to reformers and tend to stay out of their way. Unlike many districts in Ohio, CCS chose to sign on to the state's Race to the Top application for both rounds of the competition.

Columbus received its highest score for **municipal environment**. This is largely due to the presence of multiple state-level education advocacy organizations and a supportive media environment. Indeed, the editorial pages of the *Columbus Dispatch* tend to support such innovations as school choice, performance-based pay, and alternative teacher certification. Survey respondents also praise the business and philanthropic communities for their vocal support of education reform, even if it does not translate into financial backing.

3. The cap is structured so that each authorizer is allotted a certain number of schools each, but when an authorizer shuts down a school, it counts against the total—meaning they lose a slot every time they close a school. This arrangement does not encourage quality control.

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

6. 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

Columbus is neither exceptionally welcoming to entrepreneurs nor overly hostile: Its union is not all-powerful, its primary school district is somewhat receptive to reform, and its quality-control metrics and charter school environment are middle of the road. In sum, entrepreneurs will have to ask themselves as they seek to set up shop here: Is a city that is “average” in terms of reform-friendliness worth our effort?

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.