

How reform-friendly is Dallas?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	12 of 26	14 of 25	N/A	N/A	6 of 26	15 of 25

Overview

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

This review of Dallas is limited by a low response rate on the local stakeholder survey. This resulted in too few indicators to calculate rankings for Charter Environment and Quality Control (see Appendix A for Methodology). Still, we include here information from the local responses that we did receive as well as publicly available data, national survey responses, and interviews.

Though Dallas has a few pieces of the education-reform pie in place, it has yet to gain serious momentum around educational change. This is due to a number of factors, especially the absence of a clear

reform vision or leader—civic, political, or district—to spearhead such an effort, as well as mediocre amounts of reform-oriented capital. There is movement in the right direction—the district, for example, has recently begun to reach out to non-traditional providers—but without spirited organization of those efforts, serious reform is unlikely to take off.

Race to the Top Update: Texas—Dallas

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

Dallas is home to middling, but growing, pipelines of **human capital**. The city hosts a small number of alternatively trained teachers—Teach For America opened there in 2009 and Texas’s statewide Teaching Fellows (run by The New Teacher Project) places students there as well—but it does not yet have local talent in abundance, nor is it particularly easy to recruit talented individuals to relocate there. Moreover,

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

the hiring and firing practices of the Dallas Independent School District (DISD) are sufficiently bureaucratic and mired in seniority rules as to deter new talent. And district leadership appointments are often so politicized as to forsake quality and qualifications. On a more positive note, Dallas's teachers' contract is relatively benign,² partly because Texas is a right-to-work state. But Dallas's union presence (NEA-Dallas and Alliance-AFT) remains an influential foe of reform at the polls, helping to turn out lots of voters in favor of union-friendly candidates.

Dallas's **financial capital** pipelines are also mediocre. Money in the city is available for nontraditional reform, but it comes mostly from a few private sources. Several philanthropies that have not traditionally focused on education reform are now turning their attention in this direction, but DISD appears unwilling to spend its own money on reform. Interviewees say that the district has discussed reform with the philanthropic community, including starting a venture fund for education, but those ideas have yet to take root.

Though a low survey response prevented ranking of Dallas's **charter environment**, available data reveal that Texas's charter laws are slack when it comes to authorizer quality and school funding.³ Though districts can be authorizers in Texas, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) sponsors the majority of Dallas's charters, while DISD authorizes just one—though some might credit this as a plus rather than a minus, since district-sponsored schools in Texas often do not have the same autonomy, or results, as their state-authorized counterparts. Charter schools presently serve near 10 percent of the district's students.⁴

Data were also too scant to evaluate Dallas on **quality-control** efforts, but we did gain some insight into statewide efforts on this front. Texas has one of the nation's strongest longitudinal data systems; not only can it track student-level data, but it has worked hard to implement this system across districts in user-friendly fashion.⁵ Still, the state test is no strong gauge of student proficiency, falling considerably below the rigor of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).⁶

Dallas's **district environment** operates under a slim agreement (as opposed to a legally binding contract) with the teachers' union, which gives DISD flexibility. And though DISD does not offer a strong voice—or much of any voice—for reform, neither does it act as much of a road block. DISD's superintendent has also recently reached out to the charter and nonprofit sectors looking for ways to work collaboratively. For example, DISD and Uplift Education, a high-achieving charter management organization that operates in the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area, joined forces on Dallas's Promise Neighborhood federal planning grant application. However, such links are just starting.

Dallas's **municipal environment** is somewhat open to reform. Nontraditional reformers will find sup-

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. *Top 10 Charter Communities by Market Share* (Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2009).

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>.

portive voices in the philanthropic and business sectors, though not so loud as in other cities and not coordinated across sectors. Local media are also lukewarm voices for reform. To its benefit, the city receives support from the Texas Institute for Education Reform, a state-level advocacy organization.

Bottom Line

No area we examined in Dallas emerged as overly advantageous for nontraditional reformers. There is lack of financial support for fledgling entrepreneurs as well as a school district that appears to be able to take or leave reform (though federal incentives could move the needle). In short, Dallas is only beginning to consider education reform, let alone seriously embark upon it.

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.