

How reform-friendly is Denver?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	5 of 26	7 of 25	8 of 24	14 of 25	10 of 26	4 of 25

Overview

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

Denver is an attractive place for education entrepreneurs. Reform efforts on both the city and state level have resulted in an overhaul of teacher pay and evaluation, a more welcoming environment for charter schools, and a keen focus on raising student achievement. Under the leadership of former Denver Public

Schools (DPS) superintendent Michael Bennet and current superintendent Tom Boasberg, the district has striven to improve the ways that teachers are hired, fired, and developed, as well as methods of shutting down and replacing and/or turning around struggling schools. Senator Mike Johnston recently—too recently to be included in our data—led a successful charge in the statehouse for an overhaul of teacher evaluation and job protection.

Race to the Top Update: Colorado—Denver

Colorado 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 May 2010, Colorado passed the Educator Effectiveness Act, which makes student value-added data worth at least 50 percent of teacher evaluations; the evaluation results are to be used in hiring, compensation, and promotion decisions, among other areas. Other legislation requires the DOE to issue an annual report on the effectiveness of educator preparation programs in the state.

Snapshot

Denver’s **human capital** pipelines are largely cleared of obstacles when it comes to steering talent into the system. A relatively flexible collective bargaining agreement has opened Denver’s classrooms to an abundance of both homegrown and imported talent.² In 1999, DPS piloted one of the nation’s first

1. This profile provides a snapshot of the data collected for Denver, Colorado, in fall 2009. For the full data, see http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_american-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>.

district-wide performance pay systems, the Professional Compensation System for Teachers (ProComp); it became mandatory in 2006 for all new teachers. Notably, this compensation system was negotiated with the city's teachers' union, which generally reflects how DPS does business.

Financial capital in Denver is readily accessible and spent with a purpose. This is particularly true of private dollars, which DPS actively seeks from national and local sources to supplement its public funds. But regardless of source, DPS's vision for its dollars is coherent and targeted, especially in regard to teacher quality and low-performing schools. Due to a collegial relationship between the district and local philanthropic community, the latter is deeply engaged in education reform. Relations with the school board are not always smooth, however, as board membership often splits between those who side with philanthropies and encourage reforms, and those who view reform-minded philanthropies as too pushy.

Denver has a strong **charter environment**, due in large part to a strong state charter law and sturdy support system. Colorado's charter law provides for nearly equitable funding of charter and traditional schools as well as access to facilities funding. There is also no charter cap.³ Charter schools are supported by a quality-conscious and well-run Colorado League of Charter Schools.

Quality control outside the charter sector is underwhelming. State-level metrics are wanting. Colorado's state tests are lackluster when compared to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); indeed, state proficiency bars are on average about 40 points below that of the NAEP.⁴ In addition, Colorado's data system leaves much to be desired. The current system cannot tie student test scores to individual teachers nor track student-level transcript information such as courses completed and grades earned.⁵ The state legislature has recently moved to update the data system, but those changes have not yet been implemented.

Denver's **district environment** is characterized by strong leadership in both the district and the teachers' union. DPS leaders are loud voices for change, and the district is focused on forward-thinking proposals like performance pay and school closures, but the teachers' union has been equally vocal and pushy in its own competing agenda. This was evidenced by the ProComp negotiations; though the measures passed with union support, they involved quite a bit of DPS-DCTA wrangling.

The **municipal environment** in Denver is very strong. In addition to a powerful philanthropic presence, education reformers will find edu-friendly media and business communities. Further, a state-level education advocacy organization, Colorado Succeeds, helps to push the reform envelope in Denver and elsewhere.

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: 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>.

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.

Bottom Line

Reformers will find a strong and welcoming reform community in Denver. Not only is DPS on board with such reforms as alternative certification, charter schools, and performance pay, but the business, philanthropic, and media sectors are willing to go to bat for them also. Still, the teachers' union is a powerful force in Denver, and while it has been willing to negotiate in recent years, it often dilutes reform and makes the process of enacting it more laborious.

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.