

How reform-friendly is Detroit?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	24 of 26	N/A	N/A	25 of 25	18 of 26	25 of 25

Overview

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

Our analysis of Detroit was limited by a low response rate on the local stakeholder survey. This resulted in too few indicators to calculate rankings for Financial Capital and Charter Environment (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.

Given **Detroit’s** abysmal student achievement and negative press in recent years, its ranking as the least reform-friendly city in this analysis is unsurprising. The city’s infrastructure is tattered and education

change is retarded by an ineffective district marred by high turnover, a teachers’ union opposed to reform, and a municipal environment unwilling to make bold decisions. Still, Detroit has moved in a positive direction since the fall of 2009, when data for this study were collected. A new wave of leaders, including Mayor David Bing and Detroit Public Schools (DPS) emergency financial manager Robert Bobb, are embracing reforms and drawing nontraditional providers, such as Teach For America, to the city. On another front, Excellent Schools Detroit, a citywide

Race to the Top Update: Michigan—Detroit

Michigan applied for round 1 and round 2 of Race to the Top funding but was not chosen as a finalist in either round. In preparation for round 1, Michigan passed several laws in January 2010 that allow for alternative certification; permit teacher compensation based, in part, on students’ academic achievement; loosen Michigan’s cap on charter schools; require the state to appoint a school reform/redesign officer to head up turnaround efforts for failing schools; increase the drop-out age from 16 to 18; diminish the collective bargaining rights of union members; and create a teacher identifier system to match teachers to individual students.

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

coalition of government, community, parent, and civic leaders, boldly plans to revamp the city's troubled school system. The success of such plans, of course, rests on any number of variables; but for now they indicate a burgeoning culture of reform in the Motor City.

Snapshot

Detroit's **human capital** pipeline is running low. The Motor City lacks a deep reservoir of talent, and recruiting external talent to move there is difficult. Teach For America operated in Detroit in 2002-04 but left due to union resistance and poor district support. A restrictive collective bargaining agreement that prioritizes veteran teachers at the expense of new ones helps to discourage fresh talent from entering the classroom.² Still, recent developments—too recent to be included in this analysis—signal improvement: DPS signed a less-restrictive teachers contract in December 2009; and a changing environment and local support brought TFA back to the city in 2009-10.

With the economic downturn and fragile state of the domestic auto industry, it comes as no surprise that Detroit suffers when it comes to **financial capital**. Despite reasonably high per-pupil expenditures in DPS, funding for *reform* is largely unavailable from public sources. Fortunately, philanthropies have lately begun to plug the holes. Though they long remained aloof to Detroit's deteriorating climate for years, now—with conditions so dire—disparate groups have come together to form a united reform coalition.

Detroit's **charter environment** enjoys strong state-level support but tepid local support. Michigan allows multiple authorizers and maintains robust authorizer accountability provisions. It also funds charter operations at equitable levels.³ Roughly 32 percent of public school students in DPS boundaries are enrolled in charter schools—one of the highest densities in this analysis.⁴ Still, local support is lacking—individual charters struggle to obtain facilities funding, and school support organizations are all but nonexistent, aside from the brand new Excellent Schools Detroit.

Detroit displays neither the metrics nor the will to exert **quality control** over its educational system. Michigan collects abundant student demographic and performance data, but does not link these data to individual teachers or to educational attainment beyond high school.⁵ The state's measure of proficiency is also much lower than that of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP).⁶ On the local level, survey respondents report that DPS does not use information to drive real-time adjustments in policy or practice.

Detroit's **district environment** has long been troubled and setting up shop in DPS can be difficult. Another large stumbling block is the teachers' union, which wields substantial sway in opposing reforms such as alternative certification, charter schools, and performance pay. That said, even the teachers'

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>.

union has made some concessions of late, including a more progressive contract passed in December 2009. And new leaders, such as Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb, have brought with them a fresh resolve for reform.

Detroit's **municipal environment** favors reform in theory, but (until very recently) did little to actively spur change. Businesses, philanthropy, and the local editorial pages all generally support alternative certification, charter schools, and performance pay; but none of these entities, nor civic leaders, have been willing to expend much political capital to advance such reforms. Still, there's hope that the 2009 election of Mayor David Bing will light the reform fire and spur municipal entities to move beyond cautious optimism.

Bottom Line

Detroit should not be written off the education reformer's map. The city faces significant hurdles to improvement and provides little in terms of entrepreneurial support; still, local forces have begun to arm themselves in pursuit of reform.

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.