

How reform-friendly is El Paso?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Overview

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

Our analysis of El Paso was severely limited by a low response rate on the national and local stakeholder surveys. This resulted in too few indicators to calculate a final grade or rankings (see Appendix A for Methodology). Still, we report here information from the local and national survey responses that we did receive as well as publicly available data and interviews.

Race to the Top Update: Texas—El Paso

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.

El Paso's location plays an important role in municipal governance, city life, and the city’s three school systems (only the largest of which—El Paso Independent School District (EPISD)—is evaluated here). Because it is so distant from other Texas cities, its education

community—reformers and establishment alike—are staunchly protective of the schools and their traditions, and distrust outsiders. (That is, unless those outsiders come bearing financial aid intended to support ongoing efforts, not new initiatives.) El Paso’s proximity to the Mexican border also means that city schools enroll many English language learners and minority students. The achievement gap between minority and non-minority students has turned city attention to education reform, but solutions have been largely traditional and, so far, ineffective.

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

Snapshot

El Paso's **human capital** leaves much to be desired. For example, though the statewide Texas Teaching Fellows program (a New Teacher Project offshoot) once sent its alternatively certified teachers there, they recently stopped because it was so difficult for the teachers to find jobs. The University of Texas-El Paso (UTEP), which exercises significant influence locally, has made it particularly hard for alternative certification programs to set up shop in the city because any teacher not trained by UTEP is considered second-rate. Further, the school district culture favors seniority above other staffing considerations. On a more positive note, Texas is a right-to-work state which makes dealings with the union more tolerable.

Financial capital in El Paso is hard to come by. Passed over by national philanthropies and lacking a strong, local philanthropic base, entrepreneurs won't find much funding here for their efforts. The dollars that are available, however, tend to help support the city's high-quality charter schools.

El Paso's **charter environment** is underwhelming. Though some of the extant schools boast impressive academic track records, they are few in number. It does not help that Texas charter law is loose on authorizer accountability and does not provide for equitable charter funding.² All of El Paso's charter schools are sponsored by the state Texas Education Agency, despite state law allowing for district authorizers; this might be a good thing, however, since district-authorized charters in Texas tend not to have the same autonomy—or results.

Quality control does not have a strong track record in El Paso. Local education politics focus more on connections and community relationships than cost-effectiveness or best practices. Local distrust of outsiders and pride in the city engender skepticism towards outsider critique. Texas as a whole, however, has a robust statewide data system. Not only is the actual data platform quite advanced, but the state has concentrated on helping districts implement that system as well.³

Entrepreneurs looking to set up shop in El Paso will not find a very hospitable **district environment**. Though the city has started to pay more attention to education reform, a fundamental distrust of outsiders undermines efforts to import innovative ideas. Since EPISD leadership is not shy about using its bully pulpit to stand up for the district and defend the status quo, reformers will find it hard to make inroads into district schools. Though there is a local teachers' union—an AFT affiliate—it seems largely peripheral to the education conversation.

When it comes to education reform, the city government and EPISD are largely on the same page. The result is a **municipal environment** that does not welcome reformers, and a mayor's office that is as distrustful of outsiders as the school district. There is no audible reform-friendly media, business, or philanthropic voice to offset this chorus of anti-reform.

2. 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).

3. 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_Compndium.pdf and http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Actions_Compndium.pdf.

Bottom Line

El Paso does not welcome challenges to the status quo, especially when the challenger comes from elsewhere. This is particularly true in education, where both EPISD and the city government prefer to blame a lack of resources as the schools' main problem. Unfortunately for them, voters are unwilling to foot the bill, voting down a recent tax increase. When and if education reform takes off, it will likely need to arise outside the system—if it can get past all the barriers.

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.