

FINDINGS

The Nation's Best Cities for School Reform

While no cities earned an overall A grade, nine of them earned solid Bs—identifying them as America's most welcoming communities for nontraditional school reformers (Table 4). They are: New Orleans, Washington, D.C., New York City, Denver, Jacksonville, Charlotte, Austin, Houston, and Fort Worth.

TABLE 4: Top Nine Cities for Education Reform

CITY	FINAL REFORM-FRIENDLY GRADE	FINAL REFORM-FRIENDLY RANK	HUMAN CAPITAL		FINANCIAL CAPITAL		CHARTER ENVIRONMENT		QUALITY CONTROL		DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT		MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT	
			GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK
New Orleans	B	1	B	2	A	1	A	1	B	8	B	2	C	18
Washington, D.C.	B	2	A	1	A	2	A	2	B	5	C	5	C	19
New York City	B	3	B	3	A	8	B	10	B	2	C	8	B	13
Denver	B	4	C	5	A	7	B	8	C	14	C	10	A	4
Jacksonville	B	5	D	14	C	21	B	11	A	1	B	3	A	8
Charlotte	B	6	C	8	B	18	No Grade		C	11	A	1	C	22
Austin	B	7	C	7	A	5	C	13	B	4	C	4	B	12
Houston	B	8	C	9	A	4	C	16	B	3	D	13	A	9
Fort Worth	B	9	D	15	B	15	C	14	B	7	C	9	A	2

In **New Orleans**, Superintendent Paul Vallas, in partnership with State Superintendent Paul Pastorek and the private entity New Schools for New Orleans, has worked hard to rethink the role of a school district and to turn post-Katrina New Orleans into an entrepreneurial hothouse. New Orleans finishes in the top five cities in every area except quality control (where it ranks eighth) and municipal environment (where it is eighteenth), with respondents describing a city rife with philanthropic support, energetic talent, and a school district receptive to nontraditional providers.

Washington, D.C.'s chancellor Michelle Rhee has gone out of her way to recruit new talent and pull forward a recalcitrant district bureaucracy. D.C. finishes in the top five cities in nearly every area (other

than municipal environment), with respondents describing a city rich with talent, a district willing to work with high-performing outsiders, and substantial extra-district support for charter schooling and nontraditional providers. It tops the list for its human capital pipelines, while coming in second for availability of financial capital and its charter environment. At the same time, respondents note a lack of municipal support from outside the mayor's office and that Rhee's hard-charging style can be polarizing within the community.

New York City's mayor Michael Bloomberg, a fierce champion of school reform, has recently launched his third term and Chancellor Joel Klein, the high-profile and tenacious leader of the million-student system, is closing in on a decade. Their multifaceted efforts have transformed a district culture once lampooned for its bureaucratic inertia. New York finishes in the top five when it comes to human capital and quality control, with respondents noting the city's support for nontraditional providers and for the deep, readily available pool of talent. New York is also an example of how big cities can use their natural assets—such as appealing to young, educated professionals and the presence of philanthropic funders and wealthy individuals—to fuel and support new ventures.

While less celebrated than New Orleans and New York City, **Denver** is home to a number of notable developments in recent years. Under two successive and admired superintendents, Michael Bennet and Tom Boasberg, and aided by the steady support of reform-minded State Superintendent Dwight Jones, Denver helped lead the nation in rethinking teacher pay. After a slow start, it has created a vibrant charter school community and fared well in terms of financial capital and municipal environment—with respondents citing the impact of the generally supportive *Denver Post* and a focused philanthropic community.

While **Jacksonville** rarely receives notice when talk turns to reform-friendly environs, the findings suggest it may deserve a careful look. Jacksonville is described by national and local respondents as a community where support from business leaders, philanthropists, and the media make for a hospitable reform environment. Jacksonville also benefits from a strong educational infrastructure at the state level, including rigorous standards for the state test, a robust data system, and America's most expansive state-operated virtual school.

Perhaps the biggest surprise on this list is **Charlotte**, long recognized as home to the accomplished Charlotte-Mecklenberg School District, but which has generally not been considered a mecca for outside entrepreneurs. Charlotte fared best in district support—illustrating how an effective and well-run district can help ensure that nontraditional problem-solvers get a fair hearing and are judged on results.

Another surprise in this list may be **Austin**. This central Texas city has been celebrated for the successful decade-long superintendency of Pascal "Pat" Forgione and for rising student achievement, but generally not for its entrepreneurial K-12 community. Yet Austin stands out with its eye to quality control and welcoming district environment. It also benefits from generous funds invested locally by the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and the contributions of a passel of wealthy former Dell executives. National and local respondents describe a district where leadership is outspoken in its support of reform, union influence is limited, and nontraditional providers find it easy to set up shop.

Houston is famed as the birthplace of two of the nation's most respected charter school chains—the KIPP Academies and YES Prep—as well as the home of the Houston Independent School District, which has taken substantial steps in areas like performance evaluation and accountability. Survey respondents note particularly strong organizational support for reformers from the nonprofit and philanthropic communities.

Fort Worth posted average ratings for the most part, with two exceptions: It boasts a particularly strong municipal environment, while its human capital pipelines are mostly stopped up. Survey respondents describe supportive business and philanthropic communities, and the *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram* evinces a strong pro-reform bias. A Broad Foundation-trained superintendent leads the district with a particular eye towards quality.

The Middle of the Pack

Eleven cities earned Cs (Table 5, page 21). One of the “high Cs”—Chicago—is a familiar name in school reform circles. Meanwhile, San Francisco and Dallas do not typically make the reform radar, but likely deserve additional consideration. Scanning some of the other C cities, such as Boston and Newark, remind us that hype must be tempered with reality when viewing cities through an ecosystems lens. Let's take a closer look at the top three “high Cs” and the bottom three “low Cs.”

San Francisco ranked low in terms of its district and municipal environments, but posted solid marks in the areas of human capital, charter environment, and quality control. The “talent” score might not surprise—given the presence of top-flight universities, San Francisco's innate appeal, and a strong Teach For America presence—but some of its other results are impressive. Especially when compared to several other California locales that fare much worse, the results suggest San Francisco is doing something right.

Chicago is known for Schools CEO Ron Huberman's—and even more so his predecessor Arne Duncan's—aggressive efforts to scrub away barriers that stifle new providers and focus on cost-effectiveness. Under Duncan's leadership, Chicago Public Schools was ambitious in its efforts to turn around low-performing schools, close failing schools, and launch charter schools through its Renaissance 2010 plan. Huberman has taken over that initiative, while tackling other issues such as teacher tenure.

Dallas received its lowest ranks in its financial capital reserves and municipal environment. The city struggles to overcome a leadership void at various levels—civic, political, and district. This has prevented bold movement on the education reform front, but as of late, an education reform conversation has begun to take off. Dallas also benefits from a relatively weak teachers' union.

Columbus did quite well in availability of financial capital—due both to its relatively high per-pupil expenditures and to its generous local philanthropic support—and in the reform-friendliness of its municipal environment. It fared poorly in securing talent. Its primary school district has some reform-friendly leanings, but they pale in comparison to many others in this report.

Similarly, **Milwaukee** has strong financial capital pipelines and a somewhat reform-friendly district

TABLE 5: Middling Cities: Those with a “C”

CITY	FINAL REFORM-FRIENDLY GRADE	FINAL REFORM-FRIENDLY RANK	HUMAN CAPITAL		FINANCIAL CAPITAL		CHARTER ENVIRONMENT		QUALITY CONTROL		DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT		MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT	
			GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK
San Francisco	C	10	B	4	C	22	A	3	B	6	F	17	B	16
Chicago	C	11	C	6	B	16	D	23	C	17	C	7	A	1
Dallas	C	12	D	12	B	14	No Grade		No Grade		C	6	B	15
Indianapolis	C	13	D	16	B	10	B	12	B	9	D	14	B	11
Memphis	C	14	D	13	B	13	C	18	D	22	D	16	A	3
Boston	C	15	C	10	B	12	C	15	B	10	F	26	A	6
Los Angeles	C	16	D	18	C	20	B	9	C	12	F	21	A	7
Baltimore	C	17	C	11	B	17	C	21	D	24	D	12	C	20
Columbus	C	18	F	23	A	9	D	22	C	16	D	15	A	5
Milwaukee	C	19	F	22	A	6	C	17	D	23	D	11	B	17
Newark	C	20	F	21	A	3	C	19	C	13	F	19	C	21

environment. But talent is not easy to come by in Brew City, nor is it easy to recruit outsiders to move there. Quality-control measures to gauge the success of Milwaukee Public School’s programs and vendors are weak; survey respondents report that the metrics that are in place are more likely to hinder than help their operations, and the district itself rarely uses data to make real-time adjustments to policy or practice.

And **Newark**, home to the recently launched, multimillion-dollar New Charter School Fund and dynamic, reform-minded mayor Cory Booker, nonetheless posted a mediocre performance across the board, with especially low marks for human capital. The city’s schools remain under state control, and the city faces myriad problems such as high unemployment rates and a looming budget deficit. Further, state law permits only the state commissioner of education to authorize charter schools and fails to provide them with adequate and equitable funding.

The Nation’s Worst Cities for School Reform

Six cities fared dismally in the final tally, with five Ds and one F (Table 6). They all fell short in multiple areas, demonstrating conditions inhospitable to dynamic school reform.

Two places that we had expected to do much better were the smallish cities of Albany and Gary, since both are known in particular as charter-friendly locales. Yet the data suggest that charter schooling in these communities has unfolded with limited support from the larger environment. **Albany**, for example, registered Fs when it came to human capital, district environment, and municipal environment. **Gary** also scored Fs in human capital and district environment. While each registered an occasional bright spot, the overall data depicted these communities as littered with political and practical obstacles to new providers.

Dollars are hard to come by in **San Jose** partly because California faces a severe budget crisis. The district environment in San Jose Unified School District is tainted by strong union resistance and leaders there are generally apathetic towards school reform (though a new superintendent may change that).

San Diego’s human capital policies are anything but friendly to entrepreneurs, and the San Diego Unified School District—under sway of the local teachers’ union—hampers reform within its perimeter. San Diego’s charter sector, however, has fared well.

TABLE 6: The Bottom Six: Cities Receiving Ds and Fs

CITY	FINAL REFORM-FRIENDLY GRADE	FINAL REFORM-FRIENDLY RANK	HUMAN CAPITAL		FINANCIAL CAPITAL		CHARTER ENVIRONMENT		QUALITY CONTROL		DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT		MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT	
			GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK
San Jose	D	21	D	17	F	25	B	5	C	15	F	20	B	14
San Diego	D	22	F	25	C	23	B	7	C	19	F	23	B	10
Albany	D	23	F	20	B	11	B	6	C	20	F	25	F	24
Philadelphia	D	24	D	19	D	24	No Grade		C	18	F	22	C	23
Gary	D	25	F	26	B	19	C	20	C	21	F	24	No Grade	
Detroit	F	26	F	24	No Grade		No Grade		F	25	F	18	F	25

Philadelphia's D might catch some by surprise. After all, the City of Brotherly Love is home to a district that has been led by a couple of highly respected maverick superintendents in the past decade (Paul Vallas and Arlene Ackerman) and gained notice for innovations like contracting school operations and launching (with Microsoft) the much-discussed School of the Future. The results, however, place Philadelphia in the bottom five in terms of financial capital, district environment, and municipal environment. Local and national respondents see a large school district marred by partisan politics, unduly impacted by the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, and lacking a coherent vision for reform.

Behind even Gary came the deeply troubled city of **Detroit**, which received Fs across the board. 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. 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. These results suggest just how far they have to go.

Taking A Closer Look

Cities Matter

Is it useful to examine multiple cities in a state, or does the influence of state policy and climate mean that the results would be fairly steady across cities? In fact, we found variation—some more significant than others—*within* states (Table 7, page 24). In the four states with multiple cities in this study (California, Indiana, New York, and Texas), overall grades varied widely, and grades within individual categories varied even more. State lines, it seems, are not destiny: Good state laws can help, but strong local leadership and strategic investment can help one locale thrive where another, similarly situated, can stagnate.

The greatest variation is in New York State, where New York City achieved top marks while Albany received a D. New York City couples strong reform leadership with a wealth of local philanthropy and its deep talent pool. Meanwhile, Albany features a scrappy charter school community under the inspired leadership of Tom Carroll, but lacks strong district or municipal leadership or the deep pockets that abound in its more glamorous neighbor.

When comparing Gary to Indianapolis, the dynamic is similar. Indianapolis is a relatively large city with a troubled school district, but it is also home to concerted political and reform leadership by the likes of former mayor Bart Peterson and The Mind Trust honcho David Harris. Indianapolis features big-city amenities, including a successful NFL franchise, which tend to make it a more desirable place to live—thus easier to replenish its human capital pipelines. Gary lacks the size and stature of Indianapolis, and has lacked the entrepreneurial political leadership of its larger neighbor.

But states still matter, too. State policies influence the data or charter school environment in very direct ways. For instance, the federal Race to the Top program has usefully pushed states to lift caps on charter schools, modify teacher tenure laws, and demolish data “firewalls” that prohibit states from

TABLE 7: Within-state Variation

CITY	FINAL REFORM-FRIENDLY GRADE	FINAL REFORM-FRIENDLY RANK	HUMAN CAPITAL		FINANCIAL CAPITAL		CHARTER ENVIRONMENT		QUALITY CONTROL		DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT		MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT	
			GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK	GRADE	RANK
CALIFORNIA														
San Francisco	C	10	B	4	C	22	A	3	B	6	F	17	B	16
Los Angeles	C	16	D	18	C	20	B	9	C	12	F	21	A	7
San Jose	D	21	D	17	F	25	B	5	C	15	F	20	B	14
San Diego	D	22	F	25	C	23	B	7	C	19	F	23	B	10
INDIANA														
Indianapolis	C	13	D	16	B	10	B	12	B	9	D	14	B	11
Gary	D	25	F	26	B	19	C	20	C	21	F	24	No Grade	
NEW YORK														
New York	B	3	B	3	A	8	B	10	B	2	C	8	B	13
Albany	D	23	F	20	B	11	B	6	C	20	F	25	F	24
TEXAS^A														
Austin	B	7	C	7	A	5	C	13	B	4	C	4	B	12
Houston	B	8	C	9	A	4	C	16	B	3	D	13	A	9
Fort Worth	B	9	D	15	B	15	C	14	B	7	C	9	A	2
Dallas	C	12	D	12	B	14	No Grade		No Grade		C	6	B	15

^AAlthough six Texas cities were included in the study, only four were graded due to lack of data. El Paso and San Antonio are omitted from the table.

linking teacher and student data. Such state-level changes have the ability to improve the health of local ecosystems in each affected city.

The Impact of Collective Bargaining

Reformers often point to union influence and collective bargaining agreements as huge obstacles. So, how much does it matter whether a city is located in a right-to-work state? Here’s one answer: Every city that receives a D or an F in this analysis is in a collective-bargaining state (Table 8). Meanwhile,

two-thirds of the top nine scorers (cities receiving a B) are located in right-to-work states (Table 9, page 26). All of the cities located in right-to-work states included in this study received a B or C, and none received a D or F.

Cities located in right-to-work states appear to have a somewhat easier time fostering hospitable entrepreneurial environments, though the presence of strong collective bargaining laws hasn’t stopped some heavily unionized cities like New York City or Washington, D.C., from taking giant strides. The lesson? Reformers and district leaders should not use collective bargaining to explain or excuse an inhospitable environment.

TABLE 8: Cities in Collective-Bargaining States

CITY	STATE	FINAL REFORM-FRIENDLY GRADE	FINAL REFORM-FRIENDLY RANK
Washington	DC	B	2
New York	NY	B	3
Denver	CO	B	4
San Francisco	CA	C	10
Chicago	IL	C	11
Indianapolis	IN	C	13
Boston	MA	C	15
Los Angeles	CA	C	16
Baltimore	MD	C	17
Columbus	OH	C	18
Milwaukee	WI	C	19
Newark	NJ	C	20
San Jose	CA	D	21
San Diego	CA	D	22
Albany	NY	D	23
Philadelphia	PA	D	24
Gary	IN	D	25
Detroit	MI	F	26

TABLE 9: Cities in Right-to-Work States

CITY	STATE	FINAL REFORM-FRIENDLY GRADE	FINAL REFORM-FRIENDLY RANK
New Orleans	LA	B	1
Jacksonville	FL	B	5
Charlotte	NC	B	6
Austin	TX	B	7
Houston	TX	B	8
Fort Worth	TX	B	9
Dallas	TX	C	12
Memphis	TN	C	14

Performance Across the Categories

Some areas prove to be more challenging for cities than others (Table 10). More cities do well in the areas of financial capital and municipal environment, for example, than they do in human capital and district environment.

TABLE 10: Grades by Category

GRADE	OVERALL GRADE	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
A	0	1	9	3	1	1	9
B	9	3	10	9	9	2	8
C	11	7	4	9	11	7	6
D	5	8	1	2	3	6	0
F	1	7	1	1	1	10	2

Performance by Category

As is already clear, performance varied a great deal across the dimensions we examined—and individual cities tended to do much better in some areas than in others. Drilling down more deeply can be useful in two ways. One, it can help entrepreneurs, reformers, educators, and funders gauge which cities are doing especially well (or poorly) in areas of particular concern. Second, it underscores the fact that few cities are uniformly “good” or “bad” when it comes to reform; most have areas of both strength and weaknesses.

Human Capital

This category measures the penetration of high-quality nontraditional recruitment programs, the flexibility of the local teacher-union contract, availability and utilization of talent, and the quality-consciousness of district personnel decisions. Cities that have made recruiting nontraditional talent and promoting more nimble management a priority, such as Washington D.C., New Orleans, and New York City, populate the top five (see Table 11). Also notable is Denver, home of the path-breaking ProComp collective bargaining agreement and one of the first districts to welcome The New Teacher Project. The cities that lagged (see Table 12) tend to be heartland communities that often encounter difficulty attracting talent and that were reported to have school systems that do not do a good job of utilizing talented employees.

The top four cities all have significant penetration by “brand-name” alternatively prepared teachers and administrators (limited for our purposes to the largest national alternative certification programs: Teach For America, The New Teacher Project, and New Leaders for New Schools). San Francisco posted the highest marks on both counts, and is the only city in the sample where brand-name alternatively prepared administrators make up more than 10 percent of school leaders. New York City had the largest absolute number of alternatively certified instructors—not surprising considering its size, but surprising in light of its history.

TABLE 11: Top Five in Human Capital

CITY	GRADE
Washington, D.C.	A
New Orleans	B
New York City	B
San Francisco	B
Denver	C

TABLE 12: Bottom Five in Human Capital

CITY	GRADE
Milwaukee	F
Columbus	F
Detroit	F
San Diego	F
Gary	F

New Orleans is the only city in the analysis without a collective bargaining agreement (the city's teachers' union was unable to reorganize after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita).⁷ This yielded obvious opportunities in regard to workforce flexibility. The other four top-scoring cities got middling grades on this measure. In addition, survey respondents gave the New York City and San Francisco school districts low marks for their stringent obeisance to “last hired, first fired” rules in making personnel decisions.

The five lowest performers all lost points due to the rigidity of their collective bargaining agreements. Milwaukee, San Diego, and Gary, in particular, were dinged for a dearth of local talent and failure to compensate via outside recruitment. All five cities have either zero or limited penetration of brand-name alternative certification programs. (Note, though, that Milwaukee opened its doors to these programs relatively recently—2009 for TFA, 2008 for TNTP, and 2006 for NLNS—and appears to be moving in a more fruitful direction; Detroit reopened its doors to TFA in 2009, while Gary is a small part of Chicago's TFA placement area.)

Financial Capital

Funding is essential fuel for launching and sustaining any venture—whether it is public dollars from government, investments by profit-seekers, and/or contributions by philanthropists. While reformers (including the coauthors) have been critical of undisciplined district spending, it is also true that high levels of state and district per-pupil expenditures make locales more attractive to problem-solvers seeking to launch new schools or to provide services to districts. Cities here are evaluated on their per-pupil funding, the presence of local philanthropic investment, and the district's commitment to pursuing philanthropy to promote reform efforts, among other areas.

Familiar names—D.C., New Orleans, Austin, and Houston—topped this category (see Table 13, page 29), along with one surprise. Newark, which performed poorly overall, got high marks due to its generous state support and per-pupil funding, and to the catalytic role of the deep-pocketed Newark Charter School Fund that launched in 2008. The bottom five cities (see Table 14, page 29) include three California locales, all of which suffer due to California's meager per-pupil funding.

Top-performing cities shared several factors. National respondents characterized their district leadership teams as proactive in seeking funding to advance reform. All five have both national and local philanthropies funneling funds into nontraditional providers; in point of fact, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is active in all five locales. All but Houston ranked relatively high when it came to per-pupil spending. Local survey respondents did tweak Newark for lacking a coherent vision for spending but also noted that nontraditional reforms receive their fair share of philanthropic dollars and that philanthropies have been a positive influence on the city's reform aspirations.

7. The school district used in the study for New Orleans was the Recovery School District since it oversees the vast majority of its schools. Orleans Parish Schools (OPS), the other district in NOLA, existed pre-Katrina but runs only a small number of schools today. Neither the Orleans Parish School Board, which oversees OPS, nor the Recovery School District has a collective bargaining contract with the United Teachers of New Orleans.

TABLE 13: Top Five in Financial Capital

CITY	GRADE
New Orleans	A
Washington, D.C.	A
Newark	A
Houston	A
Austin	A

TABLE 14: Bottom Five in Financial Capital

CITY	GRADE
Jacksonville	C
San Francisco	C
San Diego	C
Philadelphia	D
San Jose	F

Of the cities that fared worst in this realm, none has very high per-pupil expenditures. National respondents also characterized them as generally lacking “venture” dollars from public or private sources. San Diego fared especially poorly for the district’s lack of coherent vision when it comes to spending decisions, and for district lethargy in securing additional funding for reform.

Charter Environment

Reformers in some communities have made great strides in recruiting and cultivating high-performing charter schools, actively policing their quality, and helping them secure funding and facilities. Further, some states have nurtured authorizing and statutory environments conducive to supporting charter school excellence. These are the types of indicators measured in this category.

Two cities with exceptionally large percentages of students enrolled in charters, New Orleans and Washington, D.C., finished in the top five (see Table 15, page 30). Especially notable in New Orleans is New Schools for New Orleans, a nonprofit enterprise that has helped recruit promising charter operators and secure facilities, cultivate local relationships, and incubate new operators. Top-five finishers are also notable for their generally strong state charter environments, the presence of multiple authorizers, and the availability of resources and support.

Among the top five, only New Orleans was located in a state that the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools considers a healthy authorizing environment (with multiple authorizers, adequate state funding, and rigorous rules for authorizer quality).⁸

The worst-performing cities for charter school environment also display some common features (see Table 16, page 30). In none do charters serve a significant percentage of the pupils in the city’s primary school district. Three jurisdictions (Gary, Baltimore, and Chicago) were marked down due to lax state-level support and oversight of authorizers. Seattle’s abysmal grade here is unsurprising, considering that it’s located in a state with no charter law.

8. The others are New York, Ohio, Michigan, and Louisiana. 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).

TABLE 15: Top Five in Charter Environment

CITY	GRADE
New Orleans	A
Washington, D.C.	A
San Francisco	A
Phoenix	B
San Jose	B

TABLE 16: Bottom Five in Charter Environment

CITY	GRADE
Gary	C
Baltimore	C
Columbus	D
Chicago	D
Seattle	F

Quality Control

The quality-control category includes measures of the rigor of state accountability systems, the comprehensiveness of data systems, district attentiveness to quality considerations, and the extent of local support geared to ensuring the quality of new providers.

Top cities boasted effective local- and state-level quality-control mechanisms (see Table 17). Jacksonville, Houston, and Austin are in states that earned accolades from the Data Quality Campaign for their data systems.⁹

Those cities with lackluster quality control tended to fare poorly across both state and local metrics (see Table 18). Memphis, Milwaukee, and Detroit fared poorly due to state performance systems that yield remarkably inflated estimates of student proficiency when compared to NAEP. All five cities are located in states that did poorly on the Data Quality Campaign rating system. The one area where bottom-five finishers did fairly well was assistance for nontraditional providers, as several of these cities boast an organization that helps tool builders or charter operators navigate tricky district regulations. Memphis, Milwaukee, and Detroit fared well on that score, though it was not enough to compensate for other weaknesses.

TABLE 17: Top Five in Quality Control

CITY	GRADE
Jacksonville	A
New York City	B
Houston	B
Austin	B
Washington, D.C.	B

TABLE 18: Bottom Five in Quality Control

CITY	GRADE
Gary	C
Memphis	D
Milwaukee	D
Baltimore	D
Detroit	F

9. For more information, see www.dataqualitycampaign.org.

Memphis deserves a special note here, given that Tennessee took ambitious steps in late 2009 and early 2010 in pursuit of federal Race to the Top funds. Those efforts, as well as Tennessee’s admirable data and accountability framework, helped the state become one of only two first-round RTT winners. As noted in the Methods section, reports such as this always offer a snapshot at a given point in time, and subsequent developments mean that picture will inevitably be imperfect. Memphis’s results are a particularly good example of how these findings ought to be interpreted in light of changing circumstances—especially because the aim of the study is to spur precisely the kind of measures that would result in higher scores and rankings.

District Environment

This category gauges districts’ organizational capacity to do business with nontraditional reformers speedily and professionally.¹⁰ We considered both 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.

Entrepreneurial providers consistently point to district leadership as critical in determining whether a particular community is a promising place to set up shop. Leading cities include Austin, Jacksonville, and Charlotte, as well as, once again, D.C. and New Orleans (see Table 19). In D.C., Chancellor Michelle Rhee has aggressively courted nontraditional providers of teachers and principals, while recruiting charter school operators to help tackle “turnaround” schools.

In the high-scoring cities, teachers’ unions are generally described as having limited sway over district decisions. In New Orleans, the union is neutered (and has no contract with the Recovery School District). In Charlotte, local respondents note that the Charlotte-Mecklenberg Association of Educators is generally skeptical of reforms like charter schools, performance-based pay, or alternative certification, but that the import of this opposition is minimized by North Carolina’s right-to-work law. Top scorers are home to districts where nontraditional providers find it easy to set up shop. Even there, however, respondents are hesitant to report that district leaders are highly visible or effective leaders for reform—with Washington D.C., led by outspoken chancellor Michelle Rhee, the only locality to post high marks on this count.

TABLE 19: Top Five in District Environment

CITY	GRADE
Charlotte	A
New Orleans	B
Jacksonville	B
Austin	C
Washington, D.C.	C

TABLE 20: Bottom Five in District Environment

CITY	GRADE
Philadelphia	F
San Diego	F
Gary	F
Albany	F
Boston	F

10. Typically the biggest school district, which was identified for respondents in each city, was evaluated. Obviously had we evaluated a different district than the one we did, the city’s grade—in this area, and likely across the board—may have changed, for better or for worse.

In low-scoring districts, both local and national respondents tend to report heavy union influence and ill-managed central offices. National respondents also note that these are difficult places for new providers to launch operations (see Table 20, page 31). Philadelphia’s district leaders, for example, are vocal about education reform, but have done little to turn rhetoric into reality. San Diego has churned through a series of superintendents since former chief Alan Bersin departed in 2005, which has stalled reform. Boston, too, has little to show for the heralded decade-long tenure of former superintendent Tom Payzant and the energetic efforts of Superintendent Carol Johnson. A strong union provides an obstacle at every turn, while the district struggles to turn good ideas into action.

Municipal Environment

While the school-system environment is vital, so too is the larger municipal climate. Producers of all stripes migrate toward places where they feel welcome. In K-12, the attractiveness of the local ecosystem hinges on myriad factors, three of which are measured here: the presence of a significant state-level school reform advocate; the reform-mindedness of the local newspaper; and the support of the mayor, business community, and local philanthropists.

The reform-friendliest cities include two with education-focused mayors (Richard Daley in Chicago, who has control of the city schools, and Mike Moncrief in Fort Worth), one with an education advocate in the statehouse (State Senator Michael Johnson in Colorado), one with a philanthropic community particularly focused on reform (Memphis) and one with multiple state-level advocacy organizations (Columbus) (see Table 21). Cities with strong municipal environments also tend to have supportive media—local editorial boards that write favorably about nontraditional reforms and the city’s efforts in this regard. These communities also tend to be backstopped by state-level advocacy organizations that fight for education reform in the capital and by supportive philanthropic and business communities.

Cities such as Philadelphia and Detroit, which have been hampered by chaotic local politics, populate the bottom five (see Table 22). Low scorers generally lack strong state advocates for reform and the local media tend to give their efforts the cold shoulder. Municipal, business, and philanthropic leaders are also less likely to expend political capital for entrepreneurs, which makes these communities less amenable to nontraditional reform.

TABLE 21: Top Five in Municipal Environment

CITY	GRADE
Chicago	A
Fort Worth	A
Memphis	A
Denver	A
Columbus	A

TABLE 22: Bottom Five in Municipal Environment^A

CITY	GRADE
Newark	C
Charlotte	C
Philadelphia	C
Albany	F
Detroit	F

^AThere were no Ds in this category.