

## How reform-friendly is Fort Worth?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	15 of 26	15 of 25	14 of 24	7 of 25	9 of 26	2 of 25

### Overview

Which American cities are most hospitable to education reform, especially the “entrepreneurial” kind? To answer this question for Fort Worth and other cities in this study, we used publicly available data, national and local surveys, and interviews conducted with on-the-ground insiders.<sup>1</sup> Respondents provided information about the city environment as a whole as well as the Fort Worth Independent School District.<sup>2</sup> 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

Fort Worth has made great strides in education reform under the now five-years-in superintendent, Melody Johnson. Compared with other large districts across the state and nation, however, changes have been slow, gradual, and risk-averse. Though Johnson is focused on enhancing student achievement, she appears more comfortable working within the establishment than blazing a new path through or around it. Moreover, on those occasions when she attempts to make bold moves, she runs up against a bickering, irresolute school board. Still and all, the Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD) is heading in the right direction, bolstered by reform-minded but small philanthropic and business communities.

### Race to the Top Update: Texas—Fort Worth

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

Fort Worth’s **human capital** pipelines are relatively dry, especially compared to other Texas cities in this analysis. The city lacks a deep local talent pool and is home to no large alternative certification programs. Though an unrestrictive union agreement and sensible hiring protocols open the district door,<sup>3</sup> few individuals are waiting on the other side.

1. Our analysis of Fort Worth was limited by a low response rate on the national stakeholder survey; therefore, those responses were not calculated into the rankings or final grade (see Appendix A for Methodology). Still, we include here information from the national survey responses that we did receive as well as publicly available data, local survey responses, and interviews.

2. This profile provides a snapshot of the data collected for Fort Worth, Texas, in fall 2009. For the full data, see [http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news\\_american-best-and-worst-cities-for-school-reform](http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_american-best-and-worst-cities-for-school-reform).

3. For more information, see: National Council on Teacher Quality, *Teacher Rules, Roles and Rights (TR3)* database, <http://www.nctq.org/tr3/home.jsp>.

Fort Worth's **financial capital** is underwhelming. Though the philanthropic community is dedicated to education reform, the overall impact of their dollars, while positive, remains small. This is because entrenched political and institutional interests often serve to block such reforms, even as FWISD leadership actively seeks dollars to fund them. This is unfortunate, since FWISD per-pupil expenditures, adjusted for cost of living in Fort Worth, are low compared to the other school districts in this analysis (and the lowest among the other Texas cities included in this report).

**Charter schools** have made few inroads in Fort Worth. Although districts can be charter sponsors, the state Texas Education Agency is the sole charter authorizer in the city; that there is just one authorizer, however, may be off-set by the fact that Texas district-sponsored schools typically have less autonomy and lower achievement. Texas charter laws are generally mediocre, failing to emphasize authorizer quality or provide adequate funding.<sup>4</sup> Fewer than 2 percent of students in the city of Fort Worth attend charter schools.<sup>5</sup>

**Quality control** in FWISD has taken on increased significance under Johnson. Respondents report that the district uses data to make real-time adjustments in its policies and programs. Both FWISD and the city of Fort Worth also benefit from a robust state data system that is operated in a user-friendly and effectual manner.<sup>6</sup> Still, the state test is no strong indicator of student proficiency, falling below the rigor of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).<sup>7</sup>

Fort Worth's **district environment** is lukewarm. On the one hand, Johnson, a longtime educator, school leader, and Broad Superintendents Academy graduate, attempts to ensure that FWISD focuses on boosting achievement and teacher quality.<sup>8</sup> Yet she and district staff have gone about this in establishment-friendly ways, like increasing funding and adding more teacher professional development. Combined with an establishment that is all too happy to acquiesce to these moves, reformers will find some of the right end goals, but little to no will to make the bold, and often unsavory, decisions necessary to push them forward.

Fort Worth's **municipal environment** is likely not as positive as its rank suggests. A low response rate on the national survey meant those data were not included and other indicators had to carry more weight. Fort Worth's philanthropic and business communities are relatively supportive of education reform, but have a difficult time making a difference from outside the system. The mayor is interested in education, particularly from an economic point of view. He has tried to create "workforce development" partnerships and has used his bully pulpit to focus on the dropout rate, but the effect of these efforts has been blunted since he has little actual power over what happens in schools.

4. 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).

5. For all other cities in this study, charter market share was drawn from data published by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (*Top 10 Charter Communities by Market Share*). Fort Worth was *not* included in the NAPCS report; hence, the figure here was calculated using the Common Core of Data (CCD) enrollment numbers for 2007-08 by "location city."

6. 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](http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Elements_Compendium.pdf) and [http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Actions\\_Compendium.pdf](http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Actions_Compendium.pdf).

7. 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>.

8. For more information, see: [http://www.broadacademy.org/fellows/22\\_Melody+Johnson.html?page\\_filter=0](http://www.broadacademy.org/fellows/22_Melody+Johnson.html?page_filter=0).

## Bottom Line

Systemic change is heading in the right direction in Fort Worth. There are willing players in the philanthropic and business sectors—and a fairly open-minded superintendent in FWISD—but all of the pieces of the reform puzzle have yet to be assembled. Improved relations between superintendent and board—and a stronger charter presence—are two areas that need improvement.

### 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.