

INTRODUCTION

Americans have tended to discuss school reform in terms of efforts to impose solutions on systems. Those solutions may involve new reading programs or pedagogies, site-based management or block scheduling, sometimes even new school configurations and models. While there's much variety among these reforms, they all arise from the view that improving K-12 schooling is mostly a task of superintendents, with the approval of their boards or mayors or whomever, successfully imposing the right mix of changes on the bureaucracies they lead.

The present study arises from a very different philosophy of reform. It presumes that many of these balky old bureaucracies are so calcified by policies and programs, contracts and culture, that they cannot be fixed simply by top-down applications of new curricula or pedagogies. It proceeds instead from the assumption that what reform requires is the opportunity for problem-solvers to devise and bring to scale better approaches to teaching and learning, whether inside or outside of school systems. What such endeavors need to put down roots and flourish are the conditions—"ecosystems," we call them—that invite problem-solving, welcome and support problem-solvers from all directions, improve the odds of success, and nurture and encourage growth.

Though policy plays a critical role in cultivating such opportunities, local ecosystems are not just about statutes, regulations, procedures, and formulae. An ecosystem perspective reflects a far more Tocquevillian vision. It assumes there are things that federal and state government (and even local government) cannot effectively do, and that a vibrant educational environment in which children and schools flourish demands substantial dollops of private and community activity. Such things can be encouraged but they cannot be mandated. Note that we are not fixed here on "buy-in" to a top-down reform plan, but rather on a vision in which entities like media, foundations, and private nonprofits each have distinct but essential roles to play. This study, then, examines how well America's largest cities provide dynamic education problem-solvers the opportunities, scaffolds, and other supports they need to succeed.

Hard-to-learn lessons

School systems have tried for decades to emulate, import, or impose one heralded pilot site or program after another. Such efforts have mostly been earnest but rarely successful. They've been plagued by the barnacles that encumber today's school systems, including inefficient human resource departments, constrictive collective bargaining agreements, outdated technology, ill-designed management information systems, and other structural impediments.

Continuing in this mode does not bode well for our children. It's time to view education reform through different lenses and to clear pathways for other sorts of initiatives with greater odds of succeeding. In sector after sector, solving new problems—or more effectively tackling old ones—has been the province of new entrants.

But these ventures run into many hindrances on the ground. Some are formal barriers, others subtle, informal impediments. The formal kind include regulations that hamper the opening of a charter school, state licensure systems that make it costly and onerous for candidates to obtain teaching certification, and textbook approval systems so arduous that only the largest publishers are able to compete successfully. The informal kind includes political sniping, operational routines, and cultural norms.

Knocking down such obstacles is part of equipping problem-solvers to succeed—and too often that important work has been tackled in piecemeal fashion, often dependent on the reign of an outsized personality in the superintendent’s office or the product of extraordinary circumstance (most famously, when Hurricane Katrina toppled most of the structures, arrangements, and norms that had long prevailed in New Orleans). But creating an environment in which problem-solvers can succeed entails more than knocking down barriers. It also entails fostering nimble, cooperative, and performance-oriented district and municipal governance; resources; talent; infrastructure; and sensible quality control.

What does “nontraditional” mean anyway?

If the province of solving new problems is frequently the province of new providers, then such endeavors represent critical pieces of the school improvement puzzle. These new, specialized, and entrepreneurial providers are typically described by the umbrella term “nontraditional”—they operate outside the “traditional” system of school districts, colleges of education, and brick and mortar schools. However, these ventures are noteworthy not because they are “nontraditional” per se, but because they have been created free from the bureaucracy, aged arrangements, unwieldy contracts, multiplicity of cooks, and political interference that hamper traditional districts and programs.

Their roles vary: Some provide schooling options other than traditional district schools (e.g., charter schools, virtual education), others recruit or train teachers or leaders in alternative ways, and still others develop new tools, technologies, data systems, and learning aids that can help solve operational challenges or boost achievement. It can be useful to think of these endeavors as falling into three categories: school builders, talent providers, and tool builders.

Some of these ventures are marquee organizations like Teach For America, the KIPP Academies, Green Dot Public Schools, New Leaders for New Schools, and The New Teacher Project. But there are also several dozen less well-known enterprises such as Wireless Generation, National Heritage Academies, Smarthinking, Citizen Schools, Tutor.com, Schoolnet, CaseNEX, Citizen Schools, YES Prep, Aspire, and Teach Plus.

Purpose

This study, then, asks not whether cities have embraced this or that promising organizational reform, new program, or widely hyped instructional model, but whether they are creating opportunities to solve problems and build smarter ventures. It identifies places where district and state policy makers and local reformers have gotten this right, partly right—or not at all right. It also provides a template for the kinds of changes that can help transform lethargic urban communities.

We're talking to you...

This study is intended for three primary audiences.

- Funders and entrepreneurs looking to expand, and contemplating which cities to regard as alpha sites for reinvention.
- State and federal policy makers wanting to know which systems are leading the way, which need help, and what to do about it.
- Local reformers considering how their respective cities stack up and what they can do to make their communities more attractive to high-powered problem-solvers.

We examine and rank conditions in thirty cities.¹ While our primary focus is on each city as a complete community, we also examine conditions in the city's primary school district (typically the biggest). Oxygenating the environment for entrepreneurial reformers to breathe deeply is not the work exclusively of the school system, but of the entire community and all of its leading sectors. Rather than asking what's right or wrong with a city's schools, the question we investigate is whether the local ecosystem, including the primary school district, is configured to foster problem-solving and nurture excellence.

Key elements of an entrepreneurial ecosystem

In this report, we focus on six metrics that help assess the vibrancy of a local ecosystem. They're based upon the framework sketched by coauthor Frederick M. Hess in his 2010 book *Education Unbound*.² They also borrow, in places, from the 2009 *Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Innovation*, coauthored by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Center for American Progress, and Hess.³ The six components span the availability of talent and other resources, the vitality of the charter sector, the attention to quality control, and the caliber of local political and district leadership.

1. While it may strike some as peculiar to rank cities in the manner we have here—on ecosystems rather than test scores—it shouldn't. Outside of education, analysts seeking to judge the best places to open or expand new ventures routinely compare states and cities when it comes to business climate, transportation, universities, the labor market, and the legal and political environment. What's peculiar is *not* to do this in schooling.

2. Frederick M. Hess, *Education Unbound: The Promise and Practice of Greenfield Schooling* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development, 2010).

3. Center for American Progress, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and Frederick M. Hess of AEI, *Leaders and Laggards: A State-By-State Report Card on Educational Innovation* (Washington, D.C.: Authors, 2009), http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/11/leaders_laggards/report.html.

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 foray 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.

Methodology

This analysis examines the school-reform environments in the nation's twenty-five largest cities, plus five additional smaller communities. We reasoned that, as alleged "hotbeds" of reform, these five would permit comparisons of conditions in big cities with those of smaller but potentially more nimble locales. Ultimately, two of these cities did very well (Washington, D.C. and New Orleans, LA), while the other three (Newark, NJ, Albany, NY, and Gary, IN) did not.⁴

Our grades draw upon three types of data, beginning with extant information from reliable sources. These include, for example, earlier evaluations of state charter school laws, figures on Teach For America participation levels, and per-pupil spending figures. These data were typically obtained from large national databases and organizations (see Appendix A).

In many instances, however, the types of data we sought were not available at all, or for particular cities. So we also drew upon survey data gathered specifically for this study. Two online surveys were constructed and administered. The first was sent in late 2009 to senior leaders of sixteen national organizations that are actively involved in a number of locations across the nation, including at least a handful of our cities (see Appendix C for a partial list of organizations). These individuals oversee organizations that manage human capital pipelines, operate charter schools, develop educational technology and tools, or provide the private dollars that fund them. They were asked to comparatively rate, insofar as they are active in and/or knowledgeable about cities in our sample, such areas as the quality of district leadership, availability of local philanthropy, and support of the civic leadership.

The second survey obtained granular and city-specific data from reformers on the ground. It was designed for respondents with firsthand familiarity with local conditions. Whereas we asked national respondents to rate cities comparatively on various dimensions, local respondents provided more concrete and pointed information regarding reform infrastructure and school system behaviors in their own cities. In four areas—human capital, charter schooling, philanthropy, and local schools—we sought to identify at least one respondent in each sector in each city.

We used several methods to identify such respondents. For human capital and charter school respondents, we requested names from senior leaders at Teach For America and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. For philanthropic respondents, we requested names from leaders at a national philanthropic support organization, and then supplemented that list with organizations identified by the Foundation Center Directory as contributing to the education reform priorities of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act 2009.⁵ Repeated attempts to engage with appropriate senior-level school district

4. One obvious challenge in an exercise like this is the number of metrics on which sheer city size can confer an advantage. Larger cities are more likely to have attracted such nontraditional providers as The New Teacher Project or New Leaders for New Schools. They are also more likely to have large philanthropic communities and multiple charter authorizers. In that sense, smaller cities were playing against a stacked deck. But there are two provisos to keep in mind. First, smaller cities have off-setting advantages. It may, for instance, be easier in a small city to engage the business or philanthropic community in a focused effort or for the school district leadership to overhaul the bureaucracy. Second, the world is not a fair place. This is a report of the best and worst cities for school reform. If smaller cities or those in less geographically desirable locales have more trouble offering attractive environments or attracting talent, then, to quote a famous philosopher, "them's the breaks." Those are conditions that cities need to recognize and to do their best to overcome or offset.

5. See http://foundationcenter.org/educationexcellence/top_lists.html (accessed September 15, 2009).

operations or procurement staffs were largely ignored, so local district staff were not included in the survey. A total of 150 individuals were invited to take the local survey over a six-week period in late 2009. The response rate for the local survey was 61 percent and for the national survey, 81 percent.

As with any study, it was necessary to choose a date at which data collection ended so that the authors could start to analyze, synthesize, and write up the findings. The findings reflect the state of the cities studied as of late 2009. As with any such exercise, therefore, the findings should be read with the appreciation that tracking and analyzing the school reform landscape is inevitably a moving target—and that, inevitably, there have been subsequent developments. There would likely be some variation in grades if data collection were to take place today. Our response to concerns on this score is twofold. First, this kind of lag is the price of doing business—whether the instrument is the National Assessment of Educational Progress or anything else. Second, this merely affirms the value of conducting this kind of analysis on a more regular and sustained basis.

Note on Methods

There are many ways one can judge the reform-friendliness of cities (and districts), and we don't claim that the recipe we've baked here is necessarily the "right" one. It did allow us, however, to honor the localized nature of break-the-mold reform, which tends to unfold in particular cities rather than across states.

We're well aware that creating metrics with which to judge municipal environments, talent, or quality control is an inexact science. It's far cleaner and easier to rate cities on test scores and dropout rates than on whether they are creating conditions for entrepreneurialism. But we believe, for all its messiness, that this effort is well worth the bother. Test scores and graduation rates may tell us how well hard-pressed urban districts are carrying out essential tasks today, and whether they've improved over time, but they can't tell us how districts are positioned to succeed going forward—much less whether they are poised to energize local schooling or pursue transformational improvement.

That said, we make no claims that we have gotten the categories or the metrics just right, nor that we have precisely captured every detail about every individual city—most especially when these involve recent developments. As with any effort to rank cities on transportation, health care, livability, or economic prospects, this exercise turns on judgments about what matters and how best to measure those things. For those who find our premise and approach compelling, we trust they will find our effort to be fodder for reflection, debate, and reanalysis.

Grading Metric

We evaluated our study cities along the six dimensions noted above and, within each of these, based our grades on a number of different criteria. (See Appendix A for the full methodology.)

Human Capital

- To what extent have nontraditional teachers and administrators penetrated the city?
- How restrictive is the teachers' union contract when it comes to the recruitment, hiring, and firing processes of the local school district?
- How easy is it for entrepreneurs to find locally grown talent in this city?
- How easy is it for entrepreneurs to import talent to this city?
- How do district hiring processes support or interfere with the talent pipeline in this city?
- How do district termination processes support or interfere with the talent pipeline in this city?

Financial Capital

- What is the per-pupil expenditure (adjusted for the cost of living) in the city's primary school district?
- Where is money most available? From philanthropic or public sources, or private investors?
- Does the local school district seek non-public dollars to further its reform ambitions?
- Are local dollars available in this city for nontraditional education reforms?
- Are national dollars available in this city for nontraditional education reforms?⁶
- What impact do philanthropic dollars have on nontraditional education reforms in this city?
- Does the district have a coherent vision for how to spend its dollars strategically?

Charter Environment

- Are there any high-quality non-LEA charter school authorizers?
- Are charter schools funded fairly compared to traditional schools?
- To what extent have charters penetrated the market?
- What is the status of the state's charter school cap?
- What kind of non-district support exists for charter schools?
- Does the biggest authorizer in this city exercise effective authorizing practices?
- What type of funding is available for charter schools?
- Is there a charter support organization in this city? If so, is it quality-conscious?

Quality Control

- How good is the state's longitudinal data system?
- How rigorous is the state test, compared to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)?
- Are quality-control mechanisms used well in the city?
- Is there outside support for nontraditional reformers that acts as an additional check on their operations?
- Are there quality-control mechanisms in place in this city's primary school district?
- Is there organizational support for nontraditional providers in this city, either inside or outside the primary school district?

6. Respondents were provided with a list of high-profile national foundations that contribute annually to education.

District Environment

- Do students in the district have access to online schooling (via a state-run virtual school)?
- How easy or hard is it for providers to set up shop in this district?
- Does the teachers' union wield considerable influence?
- Does the district support nontraditional providers trying to set up shop?
- Does the local teachers' union hold tangible sway over district decisions and operations?
- Are district leaders visible and effective voices for reform in this city?
- Does the district operate in an efficient and/or innovative manner?

Municipal Environment

- Is there a state-level education reform organization that supports nontraditional providers?
- How favorably, if at all, does the editorial board of the city's largest newspaper cover nontraditional reforms?
- Do municipal civic leaders, including the mayor, business community, and philanthropic community, have the political will to advance potentially controversial reforms?
- Do municipal civic leaders, including the mayor, business community, and philanthropic community, expend their respective political capital on nontraditional reforms?
- Does the local philanthropic community support nontraditional reforms?
- Does the local business community support nontraditional reforms?
- Are the editorial pages of the local papers supportive of reform?

Grades

A city's final grade is the average of its performance in each of the six equally weighted areas noted above. In order for a city to receive an overall grade for "reform-friendliness," it had to have enough data in at least four of the six areas. Four cities—El Paso, Phoenix, San Antonio, and Seattle—did not meet this criterion and, consequently, do not have final grades.

All data were translated onto a 0-4 grading scale (see Appendix A). Table 3 shows the grading scale.

TABLE 3: Grading Scale

>3.0	A
2.50-2.99	B
2.00-2.49	C
1.50-1.99	D
<1.49	F