

How reform-friendly is Los Angeles?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	18 of 26	20 of 25	9 of 24	12 of 25	21 of 26	7 of 25

Overview

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

Los Angeles is home to a number of pro-reform constituencies, but the enormity of the city—and its school district—often dilutes the effectiveness of reform initiatives. In a community with so many

low-income students—and a troubled history of failure—nontraditional reforms have not grown significantly enough to have more than a patchwork effect. That said, L.A. has a strong charter school sector and a reform-friendly municipal environment.

Race to the Top Update: California—Los Angeles

California applied for round 1 of Race to the Top funding and was not chosen as a finalist. The state reapplied for round 2 and was chosen as a finalist. In advance of the competition, California passed legislation that: allows parents to petition for a change in the structure and leadership of a failing school; lifts the charter cap; links student data to teacher employment and evaluation; revises the state’s strategic plan for use of data; and establishes inter-district open-enrollment for students in a failing school or district.

Snapshot

Though Los Angeles hosts a strong **human capital** pool, the sheer size of the city and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) muffles the

impact of reform-friendly overtures. Teach For America has funneled alternatively certified teachers through Los Angeles for twenty years, and the city has a number of its own local alternative certification programs, run by independent organizations, universities, and districts. But locally grown and recruited talent struggle to gain a voice powerful enough to counter the hulking, sluggish LAUSD, which labors under a restrictive collective bargaining agreement.² “Last hired, first fired” staffing policies protect ineffective teachers at the expense of fresh talent.

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

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

Los Angeles's **financial capital** pipelines suffer the same fate as human capital: The impact of available resources is offset by overwhelming need. Its state faces a severe public-sector funding crisis which affects all California cities in this analysis; Los Angeles is no exception. It has relatively low per-pupil expenditures, and while the city's large, diverse, and reform-minded philanthropic community helps to fill these holes, its impact is inevitably limited. Major funders provide significant contributions to reform efforts, but they tend not to pool their resources or to use a long-term coordinated strategy which might maximize effectiveness.

Los Angeles's **charter environment** is robust and diverse, though just 9 percent of all public school students there are enrolled in charters.³ California charter law is strong on authorizer accountability, requiring that authorizers have clear application, renewal, and nonrenewal policies.⁴ On the ground, charters are well supported by local organizations. But the city's largest authorizer, LAUSD itself, often stumbles in its efforts to promote quality and improve low-performing schools, with heavy regulation and paperwork often substituting for a focus on the key drivers of learning.

Decent **quality-control** metrics in Los Angeles suffer from poor implementation. Using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as the standard, California's state test is more rigorous than most other state tests in this report (though all of them, save Massachusetts, have a long way to go).⁵ The state data system is extensive and able to match individual student performance to classroom teachers. But the state falls short of building data repositories or promoting awareness of available data.⁶ Thus data often go unused locally (except in the charter office); and when data do drive reform, the inertia of LAUSD can delay effective implementation of it.

Though LAUSD has some bold leaders and initiatives, the **district environment** overall is unhealthy for reform. A major impediment is LAUSD's size and bureaucratic tendencies—a common refrain throughout this analysis. Even when district leadership favors reform, structural inertia stalls real movement; stakeholders report that the district is inaccessible and does not respond in a timely manner. A reform-minded superintendent and school board are “mere drops in a bucket,” according to one interviewee. They also face heavy pushback from a local teachers' union that wields substantial political ability to block or weaken reforms such as alternative certification, charter schools, and performance pay.

Los Angeles's **municipal environment** generally favors education reform. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, other civic leaders, and the local business and philanthropic communities are often willing to expend political capital to support nontraditional initiatives. *Los Angeles Times* editorials champion these changes, too. But while all these entities are keen on nontraditional programs, lack of coordination among them limits their effectiveness.

3. *Top 10 Charter Communities by Market Share* (Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2009).

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 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>.

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 and http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Actions_Compendium.pdf.

Bottom Line

Los Angeles's size dilutes its numerous pro-reform elements. Entrepreneurs will find various supports in the city, but will also struggle to effect real change.

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.