

## How reform-friendly is Milwaukee?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	22 of 26	6 of 25	17 of 24	23 of 25	11 of 26	17 of 25

### Overview

Which American cities are most hospitable to education reform, especially the “entrepreneurial” kind? To answer this question for Milwaukee and other cities 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 Milwaukee Public Schools.<sup>1</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

**Milwaukee** has the nation’s longest-running voucher program, dating to 1990, so it is no stranger to education innovation. The city has also struggled for decades with poor academic achievement, which has brought together civic, philanthropic, and business communities in support of education reform.

But these constituencies—and their dollars—have yet to build a strong enough consensus to challenge the inertia of the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). The district lacks bold leaders willing to ruffle feathers and advance reform. Though a handful of reform efforts have managed to gain traction in the city, charter schools and alternative certification programs among them, the need for change is far greater than the current solutions and resources available.

### Race to the Top Update: Wisconsin—Milwaukee

Wisconsin applied for both round 1 and round 2 of Race to the Top funding but was not chosen as a finalist in either round. In preparation for the competition, the state passed legislation that: streamlines state grants to Milwaukee Public Schools for improving student achievement; creates a P-16 data system; links student and teacher data; and requires school boards to consider principles and standards established by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers when approving charter schools. Legislation passed in anticipation of round 2 also gives the state superintendent authority to intervene in low-performing schools and districts.

### Snapshot

Milwaukee’s **human capital** pipelines are weak. Teach For America, The New Teacher Project (Milwaukee Teaching Fellows), and New Leaders for New Schools all operate here, though all are relatively recent arrivals and their combined constituencies are only just beginning to grow. But outside of these organizations, the city lacks a deep local talent pool, and entrepreneurs find it challenging to recruit outside

1. This profile provides a snapshot of the data collected for Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in fall 2009. For the full data, see [http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news\\_americas-best-and-worst-cities-for-school-reform](http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_americas-best-and-worst-cities-for-school-reform).

talent. MPS is further hindered by a collective bargaining agreement that incorporates a “last hired, first fired” policy and protects potentially ineffective veteran teachers at the expense of new ones.

Milwaukee benefits from public and private sectors willing to expend **financial capital** to advance education reform. Per-pupil expenditures in MPS, normed for cost of living, are relatively high and the philanthropic sector is a significant contributor to reform. Both local and national philanthropies support such initiatives as charter schools, performance-based pay, and alternative teaching routes.

Milwaukee’s **charter environment** would benefit from improved state-level management. Wisconsin’s charter law does not provide adequate oversight of authorizers; moreover, charters typically receive only 70 percent of traditional school budgets on average.<sup>2</sup> Locally, however, the two main charter authorizers, MPS and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, are both relatively selective and both intervene in—and occasionally shut down—low-performing schools. The city provides other options beyond brick-and-mortar charters, including virtual schools and a voucher program.

**Quality-control** metrics in Milwaukee are lackluster. Wisconsin’s state test is a poor measure of student achievement, markedly less rigorous than the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).<sup>3</sup> The state collects information across many student indicators but fails to match those data to teachers or to higher education systems.<sup>4</sup> (A new data system, established in November 2009, was implemented too late to be included in this analysis, but does begin to link student and teacher data.) Nor does MPS use these metrics to drive real-time improvement. Despite these shortcomings, interviewees report that the larger community is aware of the importance of using data and engaged in a rich dialogue about using them to inform achievement.

Milwaukee’s **district environment** is a significant barrier to reform. MPS leadership appears reluctant to disrupt the status quo. District leaders do not communicate a sense of urgency, make bold decisions, or have the political support they need to advance reform. Worse, they face a reform-averse teachers’ union that wields enough political influence to block or weaken such changes as alternative certification and performance pay.

Milwaukee’s **municipal environment** is open to reform, but stunted by the reality on the ground. The civic, philanthropic, and business communities are all willing to expend political capital to promote non-traditional reforms. Without district buy-in, however, there is little concrete action on the reform front. In other words, the pro-reform dialogue that exists does not necessarily spur change in the district, and does not result in action visible from a national perspective. National stakeholders perceive only a moderate disposition in Milwaukee to expend political capital to advance 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: 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>.

4. 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).

## Bottom Line

Milwaukee is mediocre in its reform-friendliness. Entrepreneurs will find like-minded philanthropic and business partners that support nontraditional initiatives, but they will also find themselves trying to operate in tension with a district wedded to the status quo.

### 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.