

## How reform-friendly is New Orleans?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	2 of 26	1 of 25	1 of 24	8 of 25	2 of 26	18 of 25

### Overview

Which American cities are most hospitable to education reform, especially the “entrepreneurial” kind? To answer this question for New Orleans and other cities examined 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 Recovery 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

**New Orleans** is the best city in this study for reformers looking to set up shop. After the devastating blow of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Big Easy jumped on its unique opportunity to rebuild the city—and its once-abysmal schools—from the ground up. National attention has funneled both talent and

finances into the city, and a breakdown (literally) of physical and organizational structures has given innovators something approaching a blank slate. In particular, the expansion of the state’s Recovery School District (RSD)—originally created in 2003 to serve low-performing schools—has introduced a centralized power structure, separate and apart from traditional districts, that begets bold, effective leadership.

### Race to the Top Update: Louisiana—New Orleans

Louisiana applied for round 1 of Race to the Top funding and was selected as a finalist, but ultimately lost. The state reapplied in round 2 and was again chosen as a finalist, after approving a bill that requires the use of value-added assessment data in school and teacher evaluations. At press time, a second bill was pending in the Senate that would allow district schools to apply for exemptions from typical district rules and regulations.

### Snapshot

New Orleans’s **human capital** pipelines are strong. Though it is historically home to a limited talent pool, post-Katrina attention and interventions have attracted many new entrepreneurs to the city. RSD works

1. This analysis examines the 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. In addition to New Orleans, LA, these smaller cities include Albany, NY; Gary, IN; Newark, NJ; and Washington, D.C.

2. This profile provides a snapshot of the data collected for New Orleans, Louisiana, 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).

collaboratively with a number of alternative certification programs such as The New Teacher Project (TeachNOLA Teaching Fellows) and New Leaders for New Schools—and Teach For America has trained teachers in New Orleans for twenty years. With no collective bargaining agreement—RSD is the only district in this analysis devoid of a teachers’ union contract or its equivalent—talent and ability become essential elements of teacher hiring processes.

New Orleans enjoys a wealth of **financial capital** across both the public and private sectors, placing the city above all others in this category. When normed for the cost of living, RSD spends more per pupil than any other district in this analysis. RSD also actively seeks private dollars for innovative programs, and both national and local philanthropies ensure that such initiatives get their fair share of money. Still, the high rate of poverty in the city cannot be ignored; although the influx of private funds from outside New Orleans has spurred organizational improvement in the education sector, many city residents remain extremely poor.

The **charter environment** thrives in New Orleans. Louisiana state law places no cap on the number of schools that can operate, and it provides for adequate funding of both charters and authorizers.<sup>3</sup> The Louisiana Charter School Start-Up fund also provides zero-interest loans for charter schools to use for facilities—an element of charter funding that many states ignore. New Orleans leads the country in its percentage of students in charters at 57 percent.<sup>4</sup> And despite their preponderance, quality control remains crucial—the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, as well as external charter support organizations, emphasize selectivity and seek to improve low-performing schools.

New Orleans has many robust **quality-control** metrics in place. The state collects longitudinal data and matches student test scores with individual teachers—though it does not always make this information easily accessible, and the data, while extensive, sometimes go unused.<sup>5</sup> On the ground, there’s a general awareness that city schools must be improved and that data must be used to measure progress.

Much of New Orleans’s overall openness to reform is a result of the forward-thinking **district environment** in and around RSD. With no collective bargaining agreement, the teachers’ union wields almost no power to block or weaken reforms, and is generally focused on narrow issues such as dismissal hearings. RSD leadership, particularly Superintendent Paul Vallas, makes bold decisions and communicates a sense of urgency. The district’s unique circumstances—its charge, essentially, to rebuild and rejuvenate New Orleans schools from the ground up—significantly shape its core mission and general approach.

Harsh criticism of former mayor Ray Nagin clouds an otherwise-positive view of New Orleans’s **municipal environment**. Overall, civic leaders, businesses, and philanthropies are willing to expend political capital to support nontraditional education initiatives, and the editorial pages of the *Times-Picayune* generally favor such reforms. Mayor Mitch Landrieu took office in May 2010 (after data were gathered for this report), and thus far has followed up on his reform-friendly campaign rhetoric.

3. 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).

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

5. 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

New Orleans is the most reform-friendly city in this analysis. Entrepreneurs will find strong human capital pipelines, readily available funding, and a pervasive enthusiasm for reform driven by post-Katrina recovery.

### 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.