

## How reform-friendly is San Antonio?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

### Overview

Which American cities are most hospitable to education reform, especially the “entrepreneurial” kind? To answer this question for San Antonio 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 San Antonio Independent School District.<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

*Our analysis of San Antonio was limited by a low response rate on national and local surveys. This resulted in too few indicators to calculate a final grade or rankings (see Appendix A for Methodology). Still, we include here information from the local and national survey responses that we did receive as well as from publicly available data and interviews.*

### Race to the Top Update: Texas—San Antonio

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.

School reform in **San Antonio** is fragmented. Though the city has a history of reform, Bexar County, of which it is the seat, contains seventeen separate school districts, meaning that the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD), the primary district we chose to evaluate, is

only part of the larger reform conversation. SAISD itself is led by reform-minded Superintendent Robert Duron, who is not afraid to ruffle feathers while addressing the unique challenges of his system. San Antonio has, and is still experiencing, significant middle-class flight to the suburbs, which, combined with an increasing Hispanic population, presents a challenging situation: A large population of English language learners but a shrinking tax base through which to finance their education. Duron has been open to innovative solutions to this problem, but is facing typical entrenched education interests as represented on the school board and local teachers’ union. Interestingly, reforms in surrounding districts, such as a long-standing voucher program in the nearby Edgewood Independent School District, have reflected positively on San Antonio’s reputation for school reform.

1. This profile provides a snapshot of the data collected for San Antonio, Texas, 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).

## Snapshot

San Antonio's **human capital** pipelines are mediocre. The city benefits from a moderately stocked local talent pool, but retro hiring and firing practices in SAISD render the integration of fresh talent into the school system difficult. This may change as recently arrived national programs like Teach For America and The New Teacher Project—which runs the Texas Teaching Fellows program—continue to grow.

**Financial capital** is relatively easy to obtain in San Antonio. Generous local philanthropy helps to compensate for not-so-robust public pipelines. Superintendent Duron and his team have played a part in attracting private capital to education, acting as vocal advocates for their system and encouraging philanthropies which may be slow to come to the education reform table. (The aforementioned Edgewood district was able to carry out its voucher program through a major private gift.)

Though a significant portion (21 percent) of students in SAISD is served by **charter schools**, the schools themselves are not well supported.<sup>2</sup> Texas's charter laws are lackluster in several areas, including authorizer quality and school funding,<sup>3</sup> while the city's largest authorizer, the state Texas Education Agency, is not known for its attention to school quality. Still, the city enjoys some intriguing charter school partnerships, such as between SAISD and Henry Ford Academy (HFA), a fine arts charter school started in Michigan: In return for SAISD facilities to operate its own school, HFA provides SAISD with its renowned arts curriculum.

San Antonio's **quality-control** mechanisms exist more on the state than local level. State-level data systems are robust and well managed.<sup>4</sup> But the rigor of the state test is unimpressive when compared to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).<sup>5</sup> SAISD itself does not utilize quality-control metrics to inform changes in policy and practice—but respondents admit that this has actually served nontraditional providers well since it makes entering the market easier. (This is problematic, of course, if it means that shoddy operators are left alone.)

The **district environment** in SAISD is quite strong when it comes to nontraditional reform. Not only is the district office well managed and responsive, but its leaders communicate a sense of urgency about education reform. Duron has increasingly been willing to rock boats, likely to the dismay of a strong school board who hired him, and other entrenched education interests, which collectively act as a counterweight to his efforts. The San Antonio Alliance for Teachers and Support Personnel is also able to sling its weight around despite having no legal contract with the district (Texas is a right-to-work state).

Similarly, San Antonio's **municipal environment** is quite reform-friendly. The city's education reform movement has benefited from a succession of mayors willing to expend political capital on nontradi-

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

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. 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).

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>.

tional reforms. Former mayor Phil Hardberger was dedicated to forging partnerships with all seventeen school districts in the metro area. His successor, Julian Castro—an up and coming Democratic Hispanic politician who took office in June 2009—maintains a no-nonsense approach and has identified education as one of his top priorities. Fortunately for him, Castro has found San Antonio’s philanthropic and business communities also supportive of education reform.

### Bottom Line

With decent talent pipelines, a significant charter sector, and supportive civic, philanthropic, and business communities, San Antonio has many of the tools it needs to welcome education entrepreneurs. But its fragmented organizational structure—particularly the multiplicity of separate school districts, each with its own bureaucracy—will present practical roadblocks to reformers looking to enter this market.

### 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.