

How reform-friendly is San Diego?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	25 of 26	23 of 25	7 of 24	19 of 25	23 of 26	10 of 25

Overview

Which American cities are most hospitable to education reform, especially the “entrepreneurial” kind? To answer this question for San Diego and other cities examined in this study, we used publicly available data, national and local surveys, and interviews conducted with on-the-ground insiders.¹ Respondents provided information about the city environment as a whole as well as the San Diego Unified School District.² 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

San Diego provides a significant challenge for any entrepreneur looking to establish new roots. With the 2005 departure of Superintendent Alan Bersin—who led an era of vigorous reform initiatives within San

Diego Unified School District (SDUSD)—school reform efforts outside the charter sector have largely stalled. An anti-reform union holds heavy sway over the school board; their hostility to reform has led to a revolving door of superintendents—most recently the estimable Terry Grier. Fragmented support for nontraditional education initiatives across the business, philanthropic, and media communities further hinders meaningful reform.

Race to the Top Update: California—San Diego

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

San Diego’s education sector lacks a robust **human capital** pipeline. While many California cities are home to national alternative certification programs, San Diego has only a handful of local, university-run programs. SDUSD alienates the talent that does exist by maintaining inefficient hiring routines that keep

1. Our analysis of San Diego was limited by a low response rate on the national stakeholder survey; therefore, those responses were not calculated into the rankings or final grade (see Appendix A for Methodology). Still, we include here information from the national survey responses that we did receive as well as publicly available data, local survey responses, and interviews.

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

alternatively certified instructors out of the classroom. A highly restrictive collective bargaining agreement protects the jobs of ineffective veteran teachers at the expense of fresh talent.³

San Diego suffers from a lack of **financial capital**, compounded by SDUSD's reluctance to actively seek funding for reform. Like other California cities, San Diego faces a budgetary crisis and spends significantly less per student than most other cities in this study. With its purse strings tight, the district funnels its money towards basic needs and requirements. Though private money is available, SDUSD does not actively seek it out. Both local and national philanthropies promote school reform in San Diego but they rarely team up to leverage their potential influence.

Entrepreneurs will, however, find a supportive **charter environment** in San Diego. By law, California charter schools enjoy equitable access to operational and facilities funding, though obtaining that funding is easier said than done. State law also prescribes robust authorizer accountability provisions.⁴ On the ground, SDUSD is selective about which charters are approved. A sizable charter support community emphasizes quality and seeks to shut down low-performing schools.

San Diego has pieces of a **quality-control** infrastructure in place but no one integrates them or puts them to optimal use. California's state data system is expansive, with the ability to match individual student performance to classroom teachers. But the state falls short of building data repositories or promoting awareness of available data.⁵ On the ground, San Diego backslides further: SDUSD fails to use metrics to drive real-time reform; its use of data actually hinders the operations of nontraditional providers, and no local counterbalances—such as mayoral staff or other municipal leaders—help such providers to overcome legal obstacles or district resistance.

The **district environment** in SDUSD is hostile to reform. The teachers' union wields considerable influence over the district. District leadership itself is weak as a result of discontinuity associated with union power. Since the departure of Superintendent Alan Bersin in 2005, the union and the anti-reform school board that it dominates have unraveled earlier reform efforts and blocked current initiatives. Reform-minded superintendents—such as Terry Grier, who has since moved to Houston—eventually have been hobbled or driven away. The result is an environment hostile to smart problem-solvers and bold reformist initiatives.

San Diego's **municipal environment** is somewhat supportive of reform but suffers from fragmentation. While the mayor and other city leaders decline to expend political capital to advance education reform, the business, philanthropic, and media communities largely support nontraditional ventures—but do not collaborate to advance common goals. San Diego's municipal environment would benefit greatly from a coherent vision and cooperation across organizations.

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

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: *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

San Diego's reform movement labors under an anti-reform school district, although the charter sector has fared well. The likelihood of other entrepreneurs' success is negatively impacted by a disjointed reform community.

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.