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August 24, 2010

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New Fordham report highlights best and worst cities for school reform

New Orleans, Washington, and NYC top list; San Diego, Philadelphia, Gary, and Detroit bring up rear.

WASHINGTON, DC – Which American cities have cultivated a healthy environment for school reform to flourish and which have not? In an exploratory study of 30 major cities, nine reform-friendly locales surged to the front: New Orleans, Washington D.C., New York City, Denver, Jacksonville, Charlotte, Austin, Houston, and Fort Worth. Six cities trailed far behind: San Jose, San Diego, Albany, Philadelphia, Gary, and Detroit. Letter grades range from B to F.

America's Best (and Worst) Cities for School Reform: Attracting Entrepreneurs and Change Agents was released today by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The analysis was conducted by Frederick M. Hess, director of education studies at the American Enterprise Institute, Stafford Palmieri, policy analyst at Fordham, and Janie Scull, research assistant at Fordham.

"Too few American cities have the talent pool, leadership, infrastructure, culture, and resources to serve as hotbeds of educational problem solving," said Hess. "But a handful of locales stand out as bright spots; they have created dynamic environments that help to attract and nurture creative problem solvers. Other cities could join them in the race to be the 'Silicon Valley' of K-12 schooling—but they have their work cut out for them."

"Much as Silicon Valley had a favorable 'ecosystem' to attract technology entrepreneurs and nurture innovation, a local ecosystem that's hospitable to entrepreneurial reform can do a lot of good on the education-reform front, too," said Fordham President Chester E. Finn, Jr. "This study points to opportunities for mayors, municipal leaders, and education officials to create such environments in their communities."

In the study, Hess, Palmieri, and Scull examined six domains that are crucial to a reform-friendly climate: 1) access to a steady flow of talented individuals; 2) a pipeline of readily accessible funding from public and private sources; 3) a thriving charter-school market; 4) attention to quality-control metrics that guide and regulate entrepreneurial ventures; 5) openness to nontraditional providers and reforms at the district level; and 6) similar openness at the municipal level.

Among the key findings:

- No cities earned an "A" grade. There were nine Bs, 11 Cs, and 5 Ds. Detroit was the sole F. (Four cities did not receive grades, due to insufficient data.)
- Scores were generally highest on the funding and municipal environment fronts. Most cities fared poorly on the strength of their human-capital pipelines, and worse still on their district environment.

[Cont'd...]

Reform-Friendliness: Final Grades in Rank Order

	City	Grade
1	New Orleans	B
2	Washington	B
3	New York	B
4	Denver	B
5	Jacksonville	B
6	Charlotte	B
7	Austin	B
8	Houston	B
9	Fort Worth	B
10	San Francisco	C
11	Chicago	C
12	Dallas	C
13	Indianapolis	C
14	Memphis	C
15	Boston	C

	City	Grade
16	Los Angeles	C
17	Baltimore	C
18	Columbus	C
19	Milwaukee	C
20	Newark	C
21	San Jose	D
22	San Diego	D
23	Albany	D
24	Philadelphia	D
25	Gary	D
26	Detroit	F
N/A	El Paso	no grade
N/A	Phoenix	no grade
N/A	San Antonio	no grade
N/A	Seattle	no grade

“This is a first-of-its-kind study,” Hess acknowledged. “We wish the methodology and data were more robust. But our approach is consistent with other rankings by entities like the Chamber of Commerce and the World Bank, that seek to report upon the entrepreneurial and business climate in cities, states, or nations. This report is not intended as the final word, but as a spur to a more serious national conversation about how cities can create the conditions where problem solvers can thrive and most effectively serve our kids.”

The Achelis Foundation, The Boston Foundation, Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, Inc., Houston Endowment Inc., The Walton Family Foundation, and our sister organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, provided financial support for the project.

For more information on this study or the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, please visit www.edexcellence.net.

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