

How reform-friendly is Seattle?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	N/A	N/A	24 of 24	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 Seattle 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 Seattle Public Schools.¹ 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 Seattle was limited by low response rates on the local and national stakeholder surveys. This resulted in too few indicators to calculate a grade or ranking for most areas (see Methodology in Appendix A). Still, we include here information from the local and national responses that we did receive as well as publicly available data and interviews.

Race to the Top Update: Washington—Seattle

Washington did not apply for round 1 of Race to the Top funding, but did apply for round 2 and was not chosen as a finalist. In preparation for round 2, the state passed legislation that: authorizes the state to intervene in low-performing schools; opens alternative certification routes; increases the probationary period for teachers from two to three years; allows for performance and innovation-based pay; and creates a more comprehensive teacher evaluation model.

Seattle is a proud city, according to one interviewee, and in recent months it has worked to become proud of its school system, too. Reform efforts have gained momentum—with a five-year restructuring plan enacted in 2008 (“Excellence for All”) and a busy state legislative session around Race to the Top—despite opposi-

tion from a stalwart teachers’ union on both the state and local levels. Still, the continuing absence of a charter sector in Seattle (and Washington State) is significant, as charter schools are a powerful supplier and employer of nontraditional initiatives.

Snapshot

Though Seattle’s **human capital** pipelines benefit from a deep pool of local talent, entrenched district policies effectively keep entrepreneurs out of the Seattle Public Schools (SPS). Some alternative

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

pipelines do exist—mostly small, local programs, since the city is devoid of Teach For America, the New Teacher Project, and New Leaders for New Schools—but slack SPS hiring procedures and adamant “last hired, first fired” policies keep fresh talent out of the classroom.² This may soon change, if SPS’s “Excellence for All” plan manages to restructure hiring processes and teacher evaluations.

Seattle’s **financial capital** channels are mediocre. State funding for education has stagnated in recent years, shifting the burden onto local districts, which must rely on property taxes and levies. SPS has a coherent vision for change and is disciplined about pursuing private funding to support that vision, but it does not expend its own money on nontraditional programs. National philanthropies and investors begin to plug the holes, but local funding is somewhat hard to come by, save for the locally based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It and other national foundations have joined with SPS to implement its five-year plan, but respondents struggle to name another *local* foundation that supports nontraditional initiatives.

As the only city in the analysis with zero charter schools, it is not surprising that Seattle received the lowest rank for its **charter environment**. While Washington has witnessed a handful of charter school initiatives over the past two decades, union resistance has continued to foil pro-charter efforts. The most recent attempt to establish charter schools ended with passage of charter legislation in 2005, but a union-supported referendum subsequently nullified the bill. Interviewees describe dismal prospects for a renewed charter movement in the foreseeable future.

Though Seattle’s **quality-control** metrics are strong, such measurements do not drive effective change. The state collects detailed student-level achievement data, matching student data to teachers and evaluating data across multiple years.³ Statewide assessments are a reasonable measure of quality, more rigorous than most state tests in this analysis.⁴ But SPS does not use these measurements to inform real-time adjustments or to support nontraditional programs, according to local and national respondents.

SPS’s **district environment** is a mixed bag, with some daring leaders but also strong, anti-reform opposition. Senior administrators, particularly tough-minded superintendent Maria Goodloe-Johnson, make bold decisions and communicate a sense of urgency about improving schools. And the district’s “Excellence for All” plan is supposed to revamp, among other things, teacher hiring processes and school performance frameworks. Still, the powerful teachers’ union often blocks or weakens reforms, including alternative certification, performance-based pay, and, most notably, charter schools.

Local and national survey respondents differ strongly in their impressions of Seattle’s **municipal environment**. From a national perspective, not much is happening; but locals tend to perceive pro-reform movement, possibly because small, grassroots efforts have seen more success than grand-scale projects.

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

3. 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.

4. 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>.

Bottom Line

Seattle boasts growing community and school district support for nontraditional initiatives, but weak funding and an entrenched teachers' union stifle opportunities for reform. Entrepreneurs will find both allies and challenges there.

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.