

## How reform-friendly is Washington, D.C.?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	1 of 26	2 of 25	2 of 24	5 of 25	5 of 26	19 of 25

### Overview

Which American cities are most hospitable to education reform, especially the “entrepreneurial” kind? To answer this question for Washington, D.C., 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 District of Columbia Public Schools.<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

The **District of Columbia’s** visibility as the nation’s capital, combined with mounting frustration over its dismal school performance and its dynamic new municipal and civic leadership, has spurred an education-reform revival in recent years. Concurrently, movements toward results-based accountability and greater school choice over the past decade—and the notable shortcomings of the D.C. system that these helped to unveil—have drawn widespread attention, additional resources, and a pool of talented, educational entrepreneurs to the scene.

#### Race to the Top Update: Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C., applied for round 1 of Race to the Top funding and was chosen as a finalist, but ultimately lost. D.C. reapplied for round 2 and was again chosen as a finalist. No additional education reform legislation has been enacted in D.C. in anticipation of the competition.

### Snapshot

**Human capital** pipelines in the District of Columbia are well-established and thriving. Alternative certification programs such as Teach For America, The New Teacher Project (D.C. Teaching Fellows), and New Leaders for New Schools have large footprints there. Stakeholders agree that the city is fertile soil for local talent and easily attracts outside talent. A new teachers’ union contract, painstakingly negotiated by District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) chancellor Michelle Rhee and the Washington

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 Washington, D.C., these smaller cities include Albany, NY; Gary, IN; New Orleans, LA; and Newark, NJ.

2. This profile provides a snapshot of the data collected for Washington, D.C., in fall 2009. For the full data, see [http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news\\_america-best-and-worst-cities-for-school-reform](http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_america-best-and-worst-cities-for-school-reform).

Teachers Union and allowing for performance pay and layoffs based on merit, was concluded too late to be considered in this analysis, but including its provisions would have further solidified D.C.'s already-lofty position at the top of the human capital heap.

**Financial capital** in D.C. is widely available and generously deployed. DCPS per-pupil expenditures are high even when normed for the city's high cost of living. Generous philanthropies and private investors supplement the public dollars—and DCPS leaders actively seek this private funding for innovative programs. Locals laud the district's leadership for its coherent reform vision and its successful pursuit of private financial support both local and national.

The District of Columbia is home to a thriving **charter environment**. Demand for charters and interest in starting more of them run high, public and private dollars are ample, and a loose charter cap allows up to ten new contracts per year.<sup>3</sup> The Public Charter School Board (PCSB)—the city's sole authorizer—maintains clear and transparent application and renewal processes, and utilizes comprehensive monitoring and data collection programs to ensure school quality. Both PCSB and numerous local charter-support organizations carefully pre-screen charter applications and seek to improve low-performing schools. Still, school facilities and funding are not always easy to acquire. Despite numerous unused and underutilized school buildings around the city, charters must often compete in the open market for vacant warehouses and office buildings.

The District of Columbia keeps a respectable eye on **quality control**. DCPS collects student enrollment, transcript, and graduation data, and uses them to make real-time adjustments to policy and practice—though it fails to gather more complex longitudinal data such as linking PK-12 and higher education performance.<sup>4</sup> PCSB's performance-management framework, launched in September 2009, was noted by interviewees as a good example of quality control. It evaluates charter schools on a variety of academic and non-academic measures.

Despite leaders with notable reform agendas and track records, the **district environment** somewhat hinders the implementation of nontraditional initiatives. DCPS leaders themselves communicate a sense of urgency, but they do not receive the *full* political support they need to enact bold reform. Chancellor Michelle Rhee's staunchly pro-reform but somewhat authoritarian approach often alienates support within DCPS. Union resistance to reform contributes to a negative atmosphere, though the union's ability to block or weaken reforms is not as strong as in other cities.

The District of Columbia's **municipal environment** is also polarized. Survey respondents report that Mayor Adrian Fenty is the *only* municipal leader willing to expend extensive political capital to advance education reform. That said, he sometimes pits the district and charter sectors against one another. A super-charged political atmosphere heightens distrust among key players, though interviewees say that various advocacy groups and city council members have recently become more reform-friendly.

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).

## Bottom Line

Entrepreneurs will find the District of Columbia to be fertile soil for reform, with open pipelines of funding, plenty of talent, and a warm welcome from the top. But they will have to navigate shifting political allegiances and a somewhat recalcitrant and habitually ineffectual bureaucracy.

### 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.