



**Department of  
Education**  
*Carmen Fariña, Chancellor*

Office of School Quality  
Division of Teaching and Learning

# Quality Review Report

## 2014-2015

**The Helen Keller School**

**Elementary School X153**

**650 Baychester Avenue  
Bronx  
NY 10475**

**Principal: Meghan Kelley**

**Date of review: May 4, 2015  
Lead Reviewer: Debra R. Lamb, Ed.D.**

## The School Context

The Helen Keller School is an elementary school with 700 students from kindergarten through grade 5. The school population comprises 59% Black, 25% Hispanic, 5% White, 9% Asian, and 2% Multiracial students. The student body includes 2% English language learners and 12% special education students. Boys account for 52% of the students enrolled and girls account for 48%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2013-2014 was 94.2%.

## School Quality Criteria

<b>Instructional Core</b>		
<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	<b>Area of:</b>	<b>Rating:</b>
1.1 Ensure engaging, rigorous, and coherent curricula in all subjects, accessible for a variety of learners and aligned to Common Core Learning Standards and/or content standards	<b>Additional Findings</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
1.2 Develop teacher pedagogy from a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best that is informed by the instructional shifts and Danielson Framework for Teaching, aligned to the curricula, engaging, and meets the needs of all learners so that all students produce meaningful work products	<b>Additional Findings</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
2.2 Align assessments to curricula, use on-going assessment and grading practices, and analyze information on student learning outcomes to adjust instructional decisions at the team and classroom levels	<b>Additional Findings</b>	<b>Proficient</b>
<b>School Culture</b>		
<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	<b>Area of:</b>	<b>Rating:</b>
3.4 Establish a culture for learning that communicates high expectations to staff, students, and families, and provide supports to achieve those expectations	<b>Celebration</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
<b>Systems for Improvement</b>		
<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	<b>Area of:</b>	<b>Rating:</b>
4.2 Engage in structured professional collaborations on teams using an inquiry approach that promotes shared leadership and focuses on improved student learning	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Proficient</b>

## Area of Celebration

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>3.4 High Expectations</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
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### Findings

School leaders consistently communicate high expectations to the entire staff, and provide training. School leaders and staff effectively communicate expectations and successfully partner with families to support student progress toward a path to college and career readiness.

### Impact

The effective communication of high expectations to all members of the school community results in a culture of mutual accountability that supports student progress toward meeting those expectations.

### Supporting Evidence

- Teachers regularly share with students personal experiences from their own lives, such as the treatment of different people. Teachers connect students to real-world experiences to supplement learning. For example, after reading a magazine article about clouds, kindergarten teachers invited a News 12 meteorologist to visit their students. The school plans to expand their curricular resources by integrating the community into their lessons. For example, they have invited an author, an astronaut as well as a parent who works at the New York Botanical Garden to address students during a writing workshop.
- The school's "Parent Connection" newsletter is disseminated on the first Friday of every month, which is the principal's forum for sharing news and reminders for parents. The newsletter was revised in January to include grade-specific information, curricular activities for the upcoming month, and strategies to support student success at home. Each class has a "classroom parent." A parent said, "It's my job to send out emails and call parents. We have a list of volunteers who we reach out to." Parents serve as Learning Leaders and attend school-based training. The school also has an initiative specifically to engage fathers in their children's learning as well as one focused on "Nurturing Moms."
- Students talked about a piece of work that they were proud of. "I really tried to put a lot of effort into my essay about going to school in China," said Student 1. Student 2 wrote a story about colonial times. "I got to act like a rich colonial child with ballet classes and different dresses for each day." Student 3 wrote about how forest fires and the deforestation of rainforests affect mankind. "To be honest, I wasn't doing well, but I got a memorable reaction from my teacher on this piece of work, who wrote that my work 'was a pleasure to read'." Student 4 wrote about bullying. "I feel strongly that it should stop. This injustice shouldn't go on any longer." The student received a score of "3+" on her essay. "My work continues to blossom," she said. Students responded to a question about their career interests: A nurse and veterinarian "because I like dogs"; a teacher because "I'm learning a lot here and might as well not leave it here"; a teacher "for grades not higher than second grade"; a radiologist, orthodontist, and author "because I have been interested in medical careers and my mother is attending post-college to be a nurse"; a computer engineer "because there are not so many females in this field and I will inspire other people"; and to be president "because Barack Obama inspired me."

## Area of Focus

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>4.2 Teacher teams and leadership development</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Proficient</b>
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### Findings

The majority of teachers are engaged in structured, inquiry-based professional collaborations that promote the achievement of school goals and the implementation of the Common Core. Although teacher teams consistently analyze assessment data and student work for students they share or on whom they are focused, they are beginning to analyze key elements of teacher practice.

### Impact

The professional inquiry-based collaborations have strengthened the instructional capacity of teachers and progress towards goals for groups of students. The initial work of focusing on teacher practice has not yet resulted in shared improvements in teacher practice and mastery of goals for groups of students.

### Supporting Evidence

- The agenda of a team meeting of grade 3 teachers was to use a modified tuning protocol to review on-demand writing pieces of student work for strength and areas of growth using an informational writing rubric, and to discuss ongoing strategies. This team meets every Wednesday and is facilitated by a grade leader. The presenting teacher told her colleagues that she would like to improve the student's spelling and phonics. "I wanted to move this student to being a more self-directed editor of his work". The team reviewed the task, the rubric, and three pieces of the student's writing over time on the topics of Amelia Earhart (April), Alaska (February), and Amazing Ralph (September). The teacher said "I see in the April passage a good attempt at organization. He has a hook, introduction, sense of voice, and did more analysis of cause and effect relationships in this piece. In his previous writing, he was more into pulling details. His spelling and spacing has improved." In response to a question about what has made the difference for this student, the presenting teacher said, "Our genre has changed to informational text. He's also been working with a writing partner. Also picking the right book during independent reading."
- The team is focusing on 10 students performing at different performance levels. "We used to pick just the bottom third," said a teacher. "We asked the principal to model for us. Based on her help, this is no longer an isolated process." Another team member added, "This inquiry study strengthened us; we share best practices, communicate and collaborate. It's been personally very productive." A third-grade teacher shared an example of teams sharing best practices: "I had a student with no interest in learning. In a kindergarten class, I saw a student using a WhisperPhone® (an acoustical voice-feedback headset that enables children to focus and hear phonemes more clearly as they learn to read, spell, or process information)." The team plans to develop a toolkit of best practices.
- The principal said that there was confusion in the beginning of the year about what inquiry should look like. "One of the most exciting things for me this year was that a grade team invited me to model for them. We talked through it and I gave them samples. I stayed with them for two months and now they don't need me anymore. They take a lot of accountability for each other's kids."

## Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	1.1 Curriculum	Rating:	Well Developed
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### Findings

School leaders and faculty ensure that curricula are aligned to the Common Core and strategically integrate the instructional shifts. Rigorous habits and higher-order skills are emphasized in curricula and academic tasks and are embedded in a coherent way across grades and subjects.

### Impact

There is coherence across grades and subject areas that promotes college and career readiness for all students. All learners, including English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities, must demonstrate their thinking.

### Supporting Evidence

- The school uses Pearson's *ReadyGEN* program for English language arts (ELA). Although teachers thought the literature was exceptional in *ReadyGEN*, they also identified the following challenges: "The lessons were so intensive that one lesson could take a week long"; "the readability of the texts was very high and needed modification for different learners"; "the vocabulary was very good, but the writing was just a response to reading"; "lessons were not engaging and fatigue soon set in with the kids"; and "the lessons were not high enough for our gifted and talented students". Teachers also opted not to display *ReadyGEN*'s concept boards this year because they "were not student created and not a focal point for kids." Teachers use complex text for building questioning and discussion skills, and appreciate the "exceptional exposure" to complex text in *ReadyGEN* for higher performing students.
- The school uses *GO Math!* and teachers supplement using materials such as *enVisions*, which teachers like because concepts are broken down for kids to understand. "The program emphasizes the process in math of getting to the right answer," said a teacher. There are also a lot of videos within *enVisions* to engage students. The school subscribes to the *Scholastic News* and *TIME for Kids* magazines as additional resources for curriculum-connected nonfiction and age-appropriate news stories. The school is considering engaging Rubicon Atlas as an electronic curriculum mapping system to manage the unit revisions that take place throughout the school year. The principal said she likes that "Atlas diaries for you," which refers to keeping a record of what is taught during a given period of time. As a result, teachers can reflect on what they taught and how it was taught. Each grade team has two members who are part of the curriculum mapping team. The school's professional development committee shares ideas and teaching practices. They engage in informal intervisitations to understand how their colleagues present learning objectives and activities in a different way.
- In October, teachers received professional development on a "Lesson Refining Protocol." During the months of May and June, the school's curriculum writing team is facilitating grade team meetings to reflect upon and fine-tune units of study for the next school year. This work will include creating a 2015-2016 curricular calendar for math, science, and social studies.

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>1.2 Pedagogy</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
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### Findings

Across the vast majority of classrooms, teaching practices are aligned to the curricula and reflect a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best. Teaching strategies strategically provide multiple entry points and high quality supports and extensions.

### Impact

The alignment of curriculum, coherent beliefs and provision of strategic supports and extensions result in student work products and discussions that reflect high levels of student thinking, participation, and ownership.

### Supporting Evidence

- The school's instructional focus is to "develop the skill of engaging in genuine discussion where students justify their thinking, which will have a direct impact on strengthening writing across content areas." The school believes that focusing on this area will increase all students' ability to discuss ideas, leading to greater clarity in written expression. "I have been modeling higher-order question stems which I have charted to support student awareness of the types of questions students need to ask of one another," said a teacher. "With more modeling on my part and providing more conversation time with partners, the quality of the students' discussions will increase." Teachers have also begun to differentiate for students "thick" (complex) versus "thin" (easy) questions to deepen their comprehension.
- To promote active student learning, engagement, and higher-order thinking, teachers use such tools as equity sticks during questioning and discussions, and strategies like chalk talk to generate ideas, check on learning, and solve problems. "The place where we struggle most in writing is extended response and the organization of writing," said the principal. Once a month, school administrators meet with grade leaders and members of the professional development committee. The school has a wonderful partnership with teachers from the District 75 school in their building, who have helped P.S. 153's teachers with additional strategies to serve children who do not have a diagnosis but present with characteristics of the autism spectrum. Examples of strategies shared include the student taking movement breaks every 10, 15, or 30 minutes; sugarless chewing gum to help students focus; and placing Velcro on the side of a chair for the student to feel. P.S. 153's teachers will participate in an upcoming three-week workshop facilitated by a District 75 teacher, as part of multiple professional development cycles. On Mondays, paraprofessionals attend professional learning sessions that are planned and facilitated by a teacher of an Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) class and an assistant principal.
- A Writing Workshop is focused on the essential question, "How do writers write a biography?" The teacher is using a SMART board to underline basic facts about Theodore Roosevelt. "Take a second to think; show me with your thumbs when you're ready to turn and talk" said the teacher to her students. "See if you can listen for and make connections to Theodore Roosevelt." Students report on their partner conversations: "His father called him Teddy and his bear was named Teddy." The strengths of this lesson were the opportunities provided for student choice and the use of turn and talk for discussion. In a fifth-grade class, the learning objective was, "Good readers understand how an author's word choice affects the text." During guided practice, students thought about how the author's use of a simile, "as though he were wading through quicksand," added to their understanding of the lead character's escape in the book, *George and the Secret Key to the Universe* by authors Lucy and Stephen Hawking.

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>2.2 Assessment</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Proficient</b>
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### Findings

Across classrooms, teachers use or create assessments, rubrics, and grading policies that are aligned with the school’s curricula. The school uses common assessments to determine student progress toward goals across grades and subject areas.

### Impact

Actionable feedback is provided to students and teachers regarding student achievement. The results of common assessments enable effective adjustment of curricula and instruction.

### Supporting Evidence

- The staff handbook details the following common assessments used throughout the year: published writing pieces that reflect the writing process; writing performance tasks; tri-annual on-demand writing pieces, the frequency of which the school plans to increase; reading responses; math performance tasks; running records; sight-word tests (kindergarten through grade 2), spelling inventory tests (kindergarten through grade 2), and letter sounds (kindergarten only). The following assessment programs are used: *ReadyGEN* end of unit assessments. Earlier this spring, the school was reviewing different programs to use for additional end-of-year writing assessments, such as the RALLY! Education online assessments and the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) performance-based assessment.
- Writing rubrics were developed by each grade team and through feedback and revisions were vertically aligned. The grade three informational writing rubric uses the following categories: Novice (1), Able (2), Skilled (3) and Expert (4). Scores on the rubric addressed the following informational writing traits: Lead/introduction, Development of ideas, Organization, Transition or linking words, Ending/conclusion, Conventions of language, and Vocabulary acquisition. Each scoring category is based on an “I Can Statement.” For example, “I can write on a topic and demonstrate a strong understanding of the topic/text.” A rubric used for narrative writing in a grade 4 gifted and talented class uses scoring categories with Level 3 reflecting fourth grade work and Level 4 reflecting fifth grade work.
- The school uses a variety of quick checks for understanding. Feedback is provided to students as “glows and grows.” A student reports, “My teacher talks to every student and gives us two compliments and one thing to work on. She often asks us to write a quick paragraph to check our understanding.” The use of checklists provides students with opportunities to edit their own writing and to have peers review their writing. Checklists are also used by teachers to track student mastery of standards. Following a professional development workshop on formative assessment strategies, a teacher reflected, “The means of assessment can be used not only to inspire new ideas among students but to gauge their comfort level with the material that they learned. The ‘4 Corners’ and ‘Attribute Card’ strategies in particular lend themselves to this purpose.” Another teacher reflected, “Keeping students engaged through self-assessment is so important. It is also a way for me to give feedback quickly. Student learning should be greatly impacted when students evaluate their own work or that of their peers.”