
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District:	City-Wide Application	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	All DCPS Schools	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	April 22, 2021	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
H.P.A. Numbers:	21-265	<input type="checkbox"/> Alteration
		<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition

District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and the District of Columbia Department of General Services (DGS), along with Studio Laan Architects are seeking final approval for a standardized school sign that is to be used for all public schools throughout the District of Columbia. Since the standard signage will feature an electronic component, DCPS and DGS are also requesting a waiver from Chapter 25, Section 2505.3 of HPRB’s Sign Standards which characterizes electronic signs as “...typically not appropriate for historic buildings and districts.” The electronic component will be used for all school signs in the city except those in National Historic Landmark historic districts.

Background

Efforts to establish standardized signage grew out of a need to create a recognizable “brand” for all DC public schools and to facilitate messaging via digital signage. This resulted in the development of the first prototype sign design in 2016. The prototype established three basic elements which still form the basis of the current proposal. These elements include 1.) a simple masonry podium base, 2.) an off-set, rectangular, metallic signage panel featuring the DCPS logo and the name/address of the school, and 3.) an inset rectangular, digital screen.

Over time, these elements were refined as a result of input from the sponsoring agencies and from HPO and CFA staff. On July 16, 2020, CFA formally reviewed the first proposed application of the prototype sign as adapted for Marie Reed Elementary School. The commission neither provided comments nor raised objections to the design. HPRB reviewed the same proposal the following September. HPRB did not approve the concept but offered suggestions for further refinements and agreed to establish a working group to provide additional guidance outside of the HPRB meeting. The working group met with the architects on two occasions and provided additional feedback via email so the prototype would continue to evolve in an appropriate manner. Opportunities to address questions and solicit public input were provided on March 31, 2021 via a webinar that DCPS announced to and hosted for every ANC. According to DCPS, questions were mostly procedural and no opposition to the standardized signage was expressed.

Evaluation

The simple 7’4” x 3’2” podium base anchors the sign to the ground and establishes a visual relationship with the subject schools by utilizing one of the five most common building materials for school construction – red brick, buff brick, precast concrete, limestone, or architectural cast

concrete. The materials selected for the podium base are intended to match the school materials as closely as possible.

The 4' x 7' rectangular signage panel is situated 10" above the bottom of the podium base, projects slightly forward, and is off-set to the right or left to provide design interest and establish the sign as the primary focus of the overall composition. Two color options are offered: the first features dark grey characters on a clear anodized aluminum background while the second utilizes off-white characters on a dark bronze anodized aluminum background. The two color schemes and off-set panel options provide opportunities to create greater contrast between the signage panel and the podium base and to customize individual signs to their unique environments. The rear of the sign panel can also be used to tailor individual signs further with historical information about a school's namesake or other relevant content.

Providing schools with the much needed and most up-to-date messaging technology presented a challenge due to the incongruities that usually exist between electronic signage and historic properties but DCPS and HPO crafted a set of Digital Exterior Signage Guidelines that avoid and minimize the undesirable characteristics typically associated with digital signage via a comprehensive set of restrictions. The digital screen must be limited to 3'3½" x 2'5½" and positioned along the bottom of the signage panel. The guidelines prohibit flashing, scrolling or other dynamic text; limit characters to those available on a standard keyboard; eliminate the use of images and graphics; set brightness standards that automatically decrease after sunset; restrict LED text to white characters on a black background; limit messages to no more than four lines; require electronic signage to automatically turn off between the hours of 10:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m.; and impose similar restrictions. Recognizing the exceptional, nationwide significance of National Historic Landmark historic districts such as Georgetown, the signage guidelines prohibit the use of digital screens in these historic districts altogether.

Detailed information about the proposed standardized school signage and related topics is available for reference in the DCPS Signage Manual. This document provides guidance on selecting the most appropriate sign location; establishes a requirement for HPO/CFA review of any alternative materials that may be desired for the podium base or signage panel; includes graphics and a description of smaller, secondary signage that can be used to direct people to parking, accessible entrances and other site features; and addresses a number of other topics.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board:

- 1. Find the DCPS standardized school signage design compatible with all historic schools and historic districts throughout the District of Columbia, subject to any final HPRB comments;*
- 2. Determine that the digital screen element of the standardized school signage design warrants a waiver from Chapter 25, Section 2505.3 of HPRB's Sign Standards for all DC historic schools and historic districts except National Historic Landmark historic districts, conditioned upon strict adherence to the DCPS Digital Exterior Signage Guidelines;*
- 3. Require the final DCPS Digital Exterior Signage Guidelines to be revised in accordance with any final HPRB comments (e.g. LED text must be white on a black background etc.)*

- 4. Delegate design review of any minor departure from the standardized school signage to HPO, noting that any significant departure would require HPRB review.*

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