OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL • STATE OF TEXAS
JOHN CORNYN

May 1, 2001

Ms. Elneita Hutchins-Taylor
School Attorney
Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District
10300 Jones Road
Houston, Texas 77065

OR2001-1776

Dear Ms. Hutchins-Taylor:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under the Public Information Act, chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID # 146606.

The Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District (the "district") received a request for the audio or video tapes of a student disciplinary hearing. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.026 and 552.114 of the Government Code and the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 ("FERPA"), 20 U.S.C. § 1232g. We have considered the exceptions you raise and have reviewed the information you submitted.

FERPA provides that no federal funds will be made available under any applicable program to an educational agency or institution that releases personally identifiable information, other than directory information, contained in a student's education records to anyone but certain enumerated federal, state, and local officials and institutions, unless otherwise authorized by the student's parent. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1232g(b)(1); *see also* 34 C.F.R. § 99.3 (defining personally identifiable information). Section 552.026 of the Government Code incorporates FERPA into chapter 552 of the Government Code. *See* Open Records Decision No. 634 at 6-8 (1995). Section 552.026 provides as follows:

> This chapter does not require the release of information contained in education records of an educational agency or institution, except in conformity with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, Sec. 513, Pub. L. No. 93-380, 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1232g.

Gov't Code § 552.026. "Education records" under FERPA are those records that contain information directly related to a student and that are maintained by an educational agency or institution or by a person acting for such agency or institution. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1232g(a)(4)(A). Information must be withheld from required public disclosure under

FERPA only to the extent "reasonable and necessary to avoid personally identifying a particular student." *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 332 at 3 (1982), 206 at 2 (1978).

Section 552.114 of the Government Code requires the district to withhold "information in a student record at an educational institution funded wholly or partly by state revenue." Gov't Code § 552.114(a). This office generally has treated "student record" information under section 552.114(a) as the equivalent of "education record" information that is protected by FERPA. *See* Open Records Decision No. 634 at 5 (1995).

In Open Records Decision No. 634 (1995), this office concluded that (1) an educational agency or institution may withhold from public disclosure information that is protected by FERPA and excepted from required public disclosure by sections 552.026 and 552.101 without the necessity of requesting an attorney general decision as to those exceptions, and (2) an educational agency or institution that is state-funded may withhold from public disclosure information that is excepted from required public disclosure by section 552.114 as a "student record," insofar as the "student record" is protected by FERPA, without the necessity of requesting an attorney general decision as to that exception.

You inform this office that the responsive audiotape involves a student disciplinary hearing and reveals the identities of the students involved. You state that the district maintains the tape recording as a record of the disciplinary action. You also inform us that the requestor has no right of access to the tape recording under FERPA, either by parental consent or otherwise. Based on these representations and our review of the information at issue, we conclude that it is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.026 and 552.114 of the Government Code and FERPA. The district must withhold the tape recording from the requestor.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the

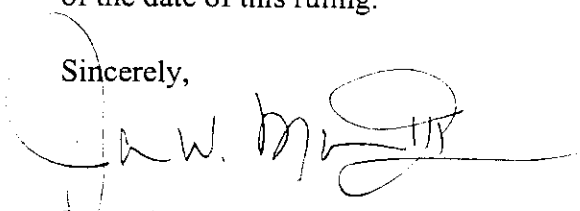
governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.–Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the General Services Commission at 512/475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



James W. Morris, III
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JWM/rr

Ref: ID# 146606

Encl. Submitted tape recording

cc: Ms. Monica Leon, Assignment Editor
KPRC/TV 2
8181 Southwest Freeway
Houston, Texas 77074
(w/o enclosures)