



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

July 24, 2006

Mr. John A. Kazen
Kazen, Meurer & Pérez, L.L.P.
P. O. Box 6237
Laredo, Texas 78040

OR2006-07981

Dear Mr. Kazen:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under the Public Information Act (the "Act"), chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 255236.

The Laredo Independent School District (the "district"), which you represent, received a request for "the district high school drop-outs list for . . . 2005 and 2006[,] including names, addresses, and telephone numbers. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101 and 552.114 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.¹

Initially, we must address the district's procedural obligations under section 552.301 of the Government Code. This section prescribes the procedures that a governmental body must follow in asking this office to decide whether requested information is excepted from public disclosure. Section 552.301(b) provides that the governmental body must ask for the attorney general's decision and state the exceptions to disclosure that it claims not later than the tenth business day after the date of its receipt of the written request for information. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(a), (b). Furthermore, pursuant to section 552.301(e), a governmental body is required to submit to this office within fifteen business days of receiving an open

¹We assume that the "representative sample" of records submitted to this office is truly representative of the requested records as a whole. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 499 (1988), 497 (1988). This open records letter does not reach, and therefore does not authorize the withholding of, any other requested records to the extent that those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

records request (1) general written comments stating the reasons why the stated exceptions apply that would allow the information to be withheld; (2) a copy of the written request for information; (3) a signed statement or sufficient evidence showing the date the governmental body received the written request; and (4) a copy of the specific information requested or representative samples, labeled to indicate which exceptions apply to which parts of the documents. Gov't Code § 552.301(e).

You inform us that the district received the request for information on April 20, 2006. However, you did not request a decision from this office until May 22, 2006, and you did not provide all of the information required by section 552.301(e) until June 7, 2006. We therefore find that the district failed to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301.

Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 results in the legal presumption that the requested information is public and must be released unless the governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information from disclosure. See Gov't Code § 552.302; *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381-82 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ) (governmental body must make compelling demonstration to overcome presumption of openness pursuant to statutory predecessor to section 552.302); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). Generally, a governmental body may demonstrate a compelling reason to withhold information by a showing that the information is made confidential by another source of law or affects third-party interests. See Open Records Decision No. 630 (1994). Because sections 552.101 and 552.114 can provide compelling reasons to withhold information from disclosure, we will address your arguments.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from public disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." This section encompasses information protected by other statutes, including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 ("FERPA"), section 1232g of title 20 of the United States Code. Section 552.026 of the Government Code incorporates FERPA into the Act. See Gov't Code § 552.026 (Act does not require release of information contained in education records of educational agency or institution, except in conformity with FERPA).

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); Open Records Decision No. 224 (1979) (release of document in student's handwriting would make student's identity easily traceable). "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).

Section 552.114 of the Government Code excepts from public disclosure "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).

We note that FERPA permits release to the public of "directory information" if the institution or agency complies with section 1232g(a)(5)(B) of title 20 of the United States Code. "Directory information" includes the student's name, address, telephone listing, date and place of birth, major field of study, participation in officially recognized activities and sports, weight and height of members of athletic teams, dates of attendance, degrees and awards received, and the most recent previous educational agency or institution attended by the student. 20 U.S.C. § 1232g(a)(5)(A).

The submitted information consists of a list of "Current Withdrawn/Not Re-Enrolled" high school students. We conclude that, as information held by the district directly related to district students who have withdrawn from high school, this information constitutes "education records" for purposes of FERPA. Moreover, we do not believe that this information is "directory information" in this context. *See* Open Records Decision No. 477 (1987) (list of university graduates who had degrees revoked, rescinded, canceled or voluntarily surrendered is confidential under FERPA and is not "directory information"). Thus, we conclude that the submitted information constitutes education records that must be withheld under section 552.101 of the Government Code on the basis of FERPA.

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 ten 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, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records promptly pursuant to section 552.221(a) of the Government Code or file a lawsuit challenging this ruling pursuant to section 552.324 of the

Government Code. If the governmental body fails to do one of these things, 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); *Tex. Dep't of Pub. 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 Office of the Attorney General 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 ten calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Robert B. Rapfogel
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

RBR/eb

Ref: ID# 255236

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Maria S. Johnson
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(w/o enclosures)