



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

August 24, 2015

Ms. Leticia D. McGowan
School Attorney
Dallas Independent School District
3700 Ross Avenue, Box 74
Dallas, Texas 75204

OR2015-17505

Dear Ms. McGowan:

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# 576417 (ORR# 14199).

The Dallas Independent School District (the "district") received a request for information pertaining to the decision to fire the requestor. The district states it will release some of the requested information, but claims the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101 and 552.135 of the Government Code. We have considered the claimed exceptions and reviewed the submitted information.

The United States Department of Education Family Policy Compliance Office has informed this office that the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ("FERPA"), section 1232g of title 20 of the United States Code, does not permit state and local educational authorities to disclose to this office, without parental consent, unredacted, personally identifiable information contained in education records for the purpose of our review in the open records ruling process under the Act.¹ Consequently, state and local educational authorities that receive a request for education records from a member of the public under the Act must not submit education records to this office in unredacted form, that is, in a form in which "personally identifiable information" is disclosed. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 99.3

¹A copy of this letter may be found on the Office of the Attorney General's website: http://www.oag.state.tx.us/opinopen/og_resources.shtml.

(defining “personally identifiable information”). The district has submitted, among other things, unredacted education records for our review. Because our office is prohibited from reviewing these education records to determine whether appropriate redactions under FERPA have been made, we will not address the applicability of FERPA to any of the submitted records. Such determinations under FERPA must be made by the educational authority in possession of the education records.² We will, however, address the applicability of the claimed exceptions to the submitted information.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure “information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision.” Gov’t Code § 552.101. Section 552.101 encompasses section 261.201(a) of the Family Code, which states the following:

Except as provided by Section 261.203, the following information is confidential, is not subject to public release under [the Act], and may be disclosed only for purposes consistent with this code and applicable federal or state law or under rules adopted by an investigating agency:

- (1) a report of alleged or suspected abuse or neglect made under this chapter and the identity of the person making the report; and
- (2) except as otherwise provided in this section, the files, reports, records, communications, audiotapes, videotapes, and working papers used or developed in an investigation under this chapter or in providing services as a result of an investigation.

Fam. Code § 261.201(a); *see also id.* §§ 101.003(a) (defining “child” for purposes of this section as person under 18 years of age who is not and has not been married or who has not had the disabilities of minority removed for general purposes), 261.001(1), (4) (defining “abuse” and “neglect” for purposes of Family Code chapter 261). The district claims the information at issue is confidential under section 261.201. We note the district is not an agency authorized to conduct an investigation under chapter 261 of the Family Code. *See id.* § 261.103 (listing agencies that may conduct child abuse investigations). The district states the information was obtained from the Dallas Police Department (“DPD”), the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (“DFPS”), or the district’s police department (the “department”). The district also states it has on staff an employee who is shared with DFPS to receive and investigate child abuse claims.

²In the future, if the district does obtain parental consent to submit unredacted education records and the district seeks a ruling from this office on the proper redaction of those education records in compliance with FERPA, we will rule accordingly.

The submitted information contains a district Suspected Child Abuse Reporting Form (the “reporting form”). We are unable to determine whether the district produced the reporting form to DPD, DFPS, or the department. Accordingly, we must rule conditionally. If the district produced the reporting form to DPD, DFPS, or the department, then it consists of information used or developed in an investigation of alleged or suspected child abuse under chapter 261, and the district must withhold it in its entirety under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with subsection 261.201(a)(2) of the Family Code. If the district did not produce the reporting form to DPD, DFPS, or the department, then it is not confidential in its entirety under section 261.201(a)(2), and the department may not withhold it under section 552.101 on that ground. Nevertheless, we note the form contains the identifying information of a person who reported alleged or suspected abuse or neglect to the Child Protective Services division of DFPS. This information, which you have marked, is within the scope of subsection 261.201(a)(1) of the Family Code. Thus, if the reporting form is not confidential under section 261.201(a)(2), then the district must withhold the identifying information of the reporting party you have marked in the reporting form under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 261.201(a)(1). We also find some of the remaining information consists of information obtained from DFPS. Therefore, the district must withhold this information, which we have marked, under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 261.201(a)(2) of the Family Code. However, the remaining information was not obtained from the Dallas Police Department, DFPS, or the department, but instead relates to an administrative investigation by the district. Thus, we find the district has failed to demonstrate the remaining information was used or developed in an investigation of alleged or suspected child abuse, or consists of a report of alleged or suspected abuse or neglect under chapter 261 of the Family Code. Therefore, the remaining information is not confidential under section 261.201 of the Family Code, and the district may not withhold it under section 552.101 of the Government Code on that basis.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code also encompasses section 261.101 of the Family Code, which provides the identity of an individual making a report under chapter 261 is confidential. *See id.* § 261.101(d). As noted above, the district is not an agency authorized to conduct a chapter 261 investigation. *See id.* § 261.103 (listing agencies that may conduct child abuse investigations). Upon review, we find none of the remaining information contains the identifying information of an individual who made a report under chapter 261 of the Family Code. Thus, the district may not withhold any of the remaining information under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 261.101(d).

Section 552.101 of the Government Code also encompasses the doctrine of common-law privacy, which protects information that is (1) highly intimate or embarrassing, the publication of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and (2) not of legitimate concern to the public. *Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 685 (Tex. 1976). To demonstrate the applicability of common-law privacy, both prongs of this test must be satisfied. *Id.* at 681-82. This office has found common-law privacy generally protects the identifying information of juvenile victims of abuse or neglect.

Cf. Fam. Code § 261.201. The remaining documents contain the identifying information of a juvenile victim of alleged abuse, including the victim's name. Accordingly, the district must withhold the identifying information of the juvenile victim in the remaining documents under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy.

Section 552.135 of the Government Code provides in part the following:

(a) "Informer" means a student or former student or an employee or former employee of a school district who has furnished a report of another person's or persons' possible violation of criminal, civil, or regulatory law to the school district or the proper regulatory enforcement authority.

(b) An informer's name or information that would substantially reveal the identity of an informer is excepted from [required public disclosure].

(c) Subsection (b) does not apply:

(1) if the informer is a student or former student, and the student or former student, or the legal guardian, or spouse of the student or former student consents to disclosure of the student's or former student's name; or

(2) if the informer is an employee or former employee who consents to disclosure of the employee's or former employee's name; or

(3) if the informer planned, initiated, or participated in the possible violation.

Gov't Code § 552.135(a)-(c). Because the legislature limited the protection of section 552.135 to the identity of a person who reports a possible violation of "law," a school district that seeks to withhold information under that exception must clearly identify to this office the specific civil, criminal, or regulatory law that is alleged to have been violated. *See id.* § 552.301(e)(1)(A). Additionally, individuals who provide information in the course of an investigation, but do not report a violation of law are not informants for purposes of section 552.135. The district states the remaining information identifies students and employees who reported alleged violations of criminal and civil laws. However, we conclude the district has failed to demonstrate how any of the remaining information reveals the identity of an informer for purposes of section 552.135. Therefore, the district may not withhold the remaining information on that ground.

To conclude, the district must withhold the following: (1) the reporting form in its entirety under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 261.201(a)(2) of the Family Code if the district produced it to DPD, DFPS, or the department; (2) the

identifying information of the reporting party you have marked in the reporting form under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 261.201(a)(1) of the Family Code if the reporting form is not confidential under section 261.201(a)(2); (3) the information we have marked under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 261.201(a)(2) of the Family Code; and (4) the identifying information of the juvenile victim in the remaining documents under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy. The district must release the remaining information. This ruling does not address the applicability of FERPA to the submitted information. Should the district determine that all or portions of the submitted information consist of "education records" that must be withheld under FERPA, the district must dispose of that information in accordance with FERPA, rather than the Act.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular information 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 information or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For more information concerning those rights and responsibilities, please visit our website at http://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open/orl_ruling_info.shtml, or call the Office of the Attorney General's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. Questions concerning the allowable charges for providing public information under the Act may be directed to the Office of the Attorney General, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,



James L. Coggeshall
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JLC/dls

Ref: ID# 576417

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)