



September 13, 2001

Ms. Elneita Hutchins-Taylor  
Attorney  
Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District  
P.O. Box 692003  
Houston, Texas 77269-2003

OR2001-4099

Dear Ms. Hutchins-Taylor:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 151945.

The Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District (the "district") received a request for a copy of all documents pertaining to the "termination" of a specified district employee from his position as head soccer coach for a specified high school. You state that you are providing some responsive information to the requestor. However, you claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure pursuant to sections 552.026 and 552.114 of the Government Code, as well as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ("FERPA"). We have considered the exceptions you claim and have reviewed the submitted information.

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). "Education records" means those records that contain information directly related to a student and are maintained by an educational agency or institution or by a person acting for such agency or institution. *See id.* § 1232g(a)(4)(A). Information must be withheld from disclosure under FERPA only to the extent "reasonable and necessary to avoid personally identifying a particular student." *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 332 (1982), 206 (1978). Section 552.114 excepts from

disclosure student records at an educational institution funded completely or in part by state revenue. This office generally applies the same analysis under section 552.114 and FERPA. *See* Open Records Decision No. 539 (1990).

In Open Records Decision No. 634 (1995), this office concluded that (1) an educational agency or institution may withhold from disclosure information that is protected by FERPA and excepted from 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 disclosure information that is excepted from 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. For purposes of FERPA, a student's handwritten letters constitute "education records" in that they contain information about identifiable students. *See* Open Records Decision No. 224 (1979) (student's handwritten comments that would make identity of student easily traceable through handwriting, style of expression, or particular incidents related in comments protected under FERPA). Accordingly, we conclude that you must withhold the student's handwritten letter in Exhibit 3 from disclosure in its entirety pursuant to FERPA. In addition, we conclude that you must withhold from disclosure all of the student identifying information you have marked in the document in Exhibit 4 pursuant to FERPA, since it, too, constitutes an "education record" under FERPA. However, we conclude that the district must release all other information contained in the document in Exhibit 4 to 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

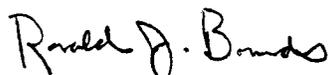
provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to 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,



Ronald J. Bounds  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

RJB/seg

Ref: ID# 151945

Enc. Submitted documents

cc: Mr. David A. Swonke  
16213 Congo Lane  
Houston, Texas 77040  
(w/o enclosures)