ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

June 16, 2006

Mr. Bob Ramirez
Escamilla & Poneck, Inc.
Attorneys and Counselors
P. O. Box 200
San Antonio, Texas 78291-0200

OR2006-06355

Dear Mr. Ramirez:

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# 252291.

The San Antonio Independent School District (the "district"), which you represent, received a request for any and all information regarding the proposed termination of a named individual. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, you acknowledge, and we agree, that the district has not complied with the statutory deadlines prescribed by section 552.301 of the Government Code in seeking an open records decision from this office. When a governmental body fails to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301, the information at issue is presumed public and must be released unless a compelling reason exists for withholding the information from disclosure. *See* Gov't Code § 552.302; *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ); *City of Houston v. Houston Chronicle Publ'g Co.*, 673 S.W.2d 316, 323 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, no writ); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). A compelling reason for withholding information is demonstrated where information is made confidential by other law or where third-party interests are at issue. Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977). Because section 552.101 can provide a compelling

reason to withhold information, we will address your arguments under this exception for the submitted information.

Section 552.101 excepts from public disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Gov't Code § 552.101. This exception encompasses information that other statutes make confidential. You raise section 552.101 in conjunction with section 261.201 of the Family Code. Section 261.201 provides in part:

> (a) The following information is confidential, is not subject to public release under Chapter 552, Government Code, and may be disclosed only for purposes consistent with [the Family 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 [chapter 261 of the Family Code] and the identity of the person making the report; and
> >
> > (2) except as otherwise provided in this section, the files, reports, records, communications, and working papers used or developed in an investigation under [chapter 261 of the Family Code] or in providing services as a result of an investigation.

Fam. Code § 261.201(a). We note that the district is not an agency authorized to conduct a chapter 261 investigation. *See* Fam. Code § 261.103 (listing agencies that may conduct child abuse investigations). Furthermore, you do not state that the submitted documents were forwarded to an appropriate agency that is conducting an investigation under chapter 261. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(e)(1) (requiring the governmental body to explain the applicability of the raised exception). Therefore, you have failed to demonstrate that chapter 261 is applicable to the submitted information.

Section 552.101 also encompasses 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). "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 (1982), 206 (1978). Such information includes both information that directly identifies a student, as well as information that, if released, would allow the student's identity to be easily traced. You inform us that portions of the submitted information identify a student of the district. We have marked the student-identifying information that is subject to FERPA.

In summary, the district must withhold the information we have marked pursuant to FERPA. As you raise no other exceptions to disclosure, you must release the remaining submitted information 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, 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); *Texas 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 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,

Candice M. De La Garza
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CMD/krl

Ref: ID# 252291

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. James W. Myart, Jr., P.C.
The Preston House
1104 Denver Boulevard, Suite 300
San Antonio, Texas 78210
(w/o enclosures)