



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

January 9, 2009

Mr. W. Montgomery Meitler
Assistant Counsel
Office of Legal Services
Texas Education Agency
1701 North Congress Avenue
Austin, Texas 78701-1494

OR2009-00364

Dear Mr. Meitler:

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# 331855 (TEA PIR #10307).

The Texas Education Agency (the "TEA") received a request for information relating to an investigation of a named educator. You state that TEA has redacted some of the submitted information pursuant to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ("FERPA"), section 1232g of title 20 of the United States Code.¹ You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.103 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.²

Section 552.103 of the Government Code provides in part:

¹The United States Department of Education Family Policy Compliance Office (the "DOE") has informed this office that FERPA 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. The DOE has determined that FERPA determinations must be made by the educational authority in possession of the education records. We have posted a copy of the letter from the DOE to this office on the Attorney General's website: <http://www.oag.state.tx.us/open/20060725usdoe.pdf>.

²We 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.

(a) Information is excepted from [required public disclosure] if it is information relating to litigation of a civil or criminal nature to which the state or a political subdivision is or may be a party or to which an officer or employee of the state or a political subdivision, as a consequence of the person's office or employment, is or may be a party.

...

(c) Information relating to litigation involving a governmental body or an officer or employee of a governmental body is excepted from disclosure under Subsection (a) only if the litigation is pending or reasonably anticipated on the date that the requestor applies to the officer for public information for access to or duplication of the information.

Gov't Code § 552.103(a), (c). A governmental body that claims an exception to disclosure under section 552.103 has the burden of providing relevant facts and documentation sufficient to establish the applicability of this exception to the information at issue. To do so, the governmental body must demonstrate that (1) litigation was pending or reasonably anticipated on the date of its receipt of the request for information and (2) the information at issue is related to the pending or anticipated litigation. *See Univ. of Tex. Law Sch. v. Tex. Legal Found.*, 958 S.W.2d 479 (Tex. App.—Austin 1997, no pet.); *Heard v. Houston Post Co.*, 684 S.W.2d 210 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, writ ref'd n.r.e.). Both elements of the test must be met in order for information to be excepted from disclosure under section 552.103. *See Open Records Decision No. 551 at 4 (1990).*

To establish that litigation is reasonably anticipated for the purposes of section 552.103, a governmental body must provide this office with "concrete evidence showing that the claim that litigation may ensue is more than mere conjecture." *See Open Records Decision No. 452 at 4 (1986).* In the context of anticipated litigation in which the governmental body is the prospective plaintiff, the concrete evidence must at least reflect that litigation is "realistically contemplated." *See Open Records Decision No. 518 at 5 (1989); see also Attorney General Opinion MW-575 (1982) (finding that investigatory file may be withheld if governmental body attorney determines that it should be withheld pursuant to section 552.103 and that litigation is "reasonably likely to result").* Whether litigation is reasonably anticipated must be determined on a case-by-case basis. *See ORD 452 at 4.*

You inform us that the submitted information is related to an open investigation of allegations that an educator engaged in inappropriate conduct. You state that TEA has filed a petition for sanctions against the educator pursuant to provisions of the Education Code and title 19 of the Texas Administrative Code. *See Educ. Code §§ 21.031(a) (TEA shall regulate and oversee standards of conduct of public school educators), 21.041(b) (TEA shall propose rules providing for disciplinary proceedings); 19 T.A.C. § 249.15(c).* You explain that if the educator files an answer to the petition, the matter will be referred to the State Office of Administrative Hearings for a contested case proceeding. *See 19 T.A.C. § 249.18.* You state that such proceedings are governed by the Administrative Procedure Act (the "APA"),

chapter 2001 of the Government Code. *See* Educ. Code § 21.041(b)(7); 19 T.A.C. § 249.4(a)(1); Open Records Decision No. 588 (1991) (contested case under APA constitutes litigation for purposes of statutory predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.103). Based on your representations, we find that the submitted information is related to litigation that TEA reasonably anticipated on the date of its receipt of this request for information. Accordingly, TEA may withhold the submitted information under section 552.103 of the Government Code.

In reaching this conclusion, we assume that the opposing party in the anticipated litigation has not seen or had access to any of the information at issue. The purpose of section 552.103 is to enable a governmental body to protect its position in litigation by forcing parties to obtain information relating to litigation through discovery procedures. *See* ORD 551 at 4-5. If the opposing party has seen or had access to information relating to anticipated litigation, through discovery or otherwise, then there is no interest in withholding such information from the public under section 552.103. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 349 (1982), 320 (1982). We also note that the applicability of section 552.103 ends once the related litigation concludes or is no longer reasonably anticipated. *See* Attorney General Opinion MW-575 (1982); Open Records Decision No. 350 (1982).

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 file suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such a challenge, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3). If the governmental body does not file suit over 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 challenge 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,



Greg Henderson
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

GH/jb

Ref: ID# 331855

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)