



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS  
GREG ABBOTT

August 30, 2010

Mr. Humberto Aguilera  
Escamilla, Poneck & Cruz, L.L.P.  
P.O. Box 200  
San Antonio, Texas 78291-0200

OR2010-13149

Dear Mr. Aguilera:

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# 392179.

The San Antonio Independent School District (the "district"), which you represent, received a request for all documents a named principal and human resources have pertaining to allegations against a named teacher. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.103, and 552.135 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, we note that 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 or an adult student's consent, unredacted, personally identifiable information contained in education records for the purpose of our review in the open records ruling process under the Act.<sup>1</sup> 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 (defining "personally identifiable information"). You have submitted redacted and unredacted education records for our review. Because our office is prohibited from reviewing these education records to determine whether appropriate redactions under FERPA should be made, we will not address the applicability of FERPA

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<sup>1</sup>A copy of this letter may be found on the Office of the Attorney General's website at <http://www.oag.state.tx.us/open/20060725usdoe.pdf>.

to any of the submitted records. Such determinations under FERPA must be made by the educational authority in possession of the education records.<sup>2</sup> However, we will consider your exceptions against disclosure of the submitted information under the Act.

Section 552.103 of the Government Code provides in relevant part as follows:

(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). The district has the burden of providing relevant facts and documents to show that the section 552.103 exception is applicable in a particular situation. The test for meeting this burden is a showing that (1) litigation was pending or reasonably anticipated on the date that the governmental body received the request for information, and (2) the information at issue is related to that litigation. *Univ. of Tex. Law Sch. v. Tex. Legal Found.*, 958 S.W.2d 479, 481 (Tex. App.—Austin 1997, no pet.); *Heard v. Houston Post Co.*, 684 S.W.2d 210, 212 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, writ ref'd n.r.e.); Open Records Decision No. 551 at 4 (1990). The district must meet both prongs of this test for information to be excepted under section 552.103.

This office has long held that for the purposes of section 552.103, "litigation" includes "contested cases" conducted in a quasi-judicial forum. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 474 (1987), 368 (1983), 336 (1982), 301 (1982). Likewise, "contested cases" conducted under the Texas Administrative Procedure Act, chapter 2001 of the Government Code, constitute "litigation" for purposes of section 552.103. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 588 (1991) (concerning former State Board of Insurance proceeding), 301 (1982) (concerning hearing before Public Utilities Commission). In determining whether an administrative proceeding is conducted in a quasi-judicial forum, this office has focused on the following factors: (1) whether the dispute is, for all practical purposes, litigated in an administrative

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<sup>2</sup>In 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.

proceeding where (a) discovery takes place, (b) evidence is heard, (c) factual questions are resolved, and (d) a record is made; and (2) whether the proceeding is an adjudicative forum of first jurisdiction, *i.e.*, whether judicial review of the proceeding in district court is an appellate review and not the forum for resolving a controversy on the basis of evidence. *See* Open Records Decision No. 588 (1991).

You state the requestor filed a grievance on behalf of her client with the district. You explain that grievances filed with the district are "litigation" in that the district follows administrative procedures in handling such disputes. You indicate, and provide documentation showing, the district's policy includes a four-level process wherein an administrator, the administrator's supervisor, and the superintendent hear the grievance at Levels I and II, and the district's board of trustees hears the grievance if the grievant appeals to Level III. You explain that during these hearings, the grievant is allowed to be represented by counsel, present favorable evidence to the district, and present witnesses to "testify" on her behalf. You state the grievant must complete the grievance process before she can appeal to the Texas Education Agency and eventually a district court in Travis County. Based on your representations and documentation, we find you have demonstrated that the district's administrative procedure for disputes is conducted in a quasi-judicial forum and thus constitutes litigation for purposes of section 552.103. You state the requestor filed her initial grievance before the instant request was received. Thus, we determine that the district was involved in pending litigation at the time it received the instant request for information. You state the information at issue directly relates to the pending litigation against the district. Accordingly, we conclude section 552.103 is generally applicable to the submitted information.

We note, however, that the opposing party in the litigation has seen or had access to some 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. Therefore, if the opposing party has seen or had access to information relating to litigation, through discovery or otherwise, then there is no interest in withholding such information from public disclosure under section 552.103. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 349 (1982), 320 (1982). Accordingly, the portions of the submitted information that the opposing party in the litigation has seen or had access to, which we have marked, may not be withheld under section 552.103. However, the district may withhold the remaining information under section 552.103.<sup>3</sup> We note the applicability of this exception ends once the litigation has been concluded. *See* Attorney General Opinion MW-575 (1982); Open Records Decision No. 350 (1982).

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<sup>3</sup>As our ruling is dispositive, we need not address your remaining argument against disclosure of this information.

In summary, except for the information that the opposing party in the pending litigation has seen or had access to, which we have marked and which must be released, the district may withhold the submitted information under section 552.103 of the Government Code. 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" subject to 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.oag.state.tx.us/open/index\\_orl.php](http://www.oag.state.tx.us/open/index_orl.php), 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 must be directed to the Cost Rules Administrator of the Office of the Attorney General, toll free at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,



Tamara H. Holland  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

THH/jb

Ref: ID# 392179

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor  
(w/o enclosures)