



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

November 16, 2016

Ms. Katheryne Ellison
Assistant General Counsel
Houston Independent School District
4400 West 18th Street
Houston, Texas 77092-8501

OR2016-25483

Dear Ms. Ellison:

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# 634196 (ORR# HC082916).

The Houston Independent School District (the "district") received a request for all e-mails between a named district principal and several specified e-mail addresses during a specified time period. You state the district has redacted student-identifying information from the submitted documents pursuant to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ("FERPA"), section 1232g of title 20 of the United States Code.¹ You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.107 of the Government Code.²

¹The United States Department of Education Family Policy Compliance Office (the "DOE") has informed this office FERPA does not permit state and local educational authorities to disclose to this office, without parental or student 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 FERPA determinations must be made by the educational authority in possession of the education records. A copy of this letter may be found on the Office of the Attorney General's website: <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/files/og/20060725usdoe.pdf>.

²Although you raise Texas Rule of Evidence 503, we note the proper exceptions to raise when asserting the attorney-client privilege in this instance is section 552.107 of the Government Code. *See* Open Records Decision No. 676 at 1-2 (2002). Further, although you also raise section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 552.107 of the Government Code, this office has concluded section 552.101 does not encompass other exceptions found in the Act. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 676 at 1-2 (2002), 575 at 2 (1990). Accordingly, we do not address your argument under section 552.101 of the Government Code.

We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.³

Section 552.107(1) of the Government Code protects information coming within the attorney-client privilege. When asserting the attorney-client privilege, a governmental body has the burden of providing the necessary facts to demonstrate the elements of the privilege in order to withhold the information at issue. Open Records Decision No. 676 at 6-7 (2002). First, a governmental body must demonstrate that the information constitutes or documents a communication. *Id.* at 7. Second, the communication must have been made “to facilitate the rendition of professional legal services” to the client governmental body. TEX. R. EVID. 503(b)(1). The privilege does not apply when an attorney or representative is involved in some capacity other than that of providing or facilitating professional legal services to the client governmental body. *In re Tex. Farmers Ins. Exch.*, 990 S.W.2d 337, 340 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 1999, orig. proceeding) (attorney-client privilege does not apply if attorney acting in a capacity other than that of attorney). Governmental attorneys often act in capacities other than that of professional legal counsel, such as administrators, investigators, or managers. Thus, the mere fact that a communication involves an attorney for the government does not demonstrate this element. Third, the privilege applies only to communications between or among clients, client representatives, lawyers, and lawyer representatives. TEX. R. EVID. 503(b)(1)(A), (B), (C), (D), (E). Thus, a governmental body must inform this office of the identities and capacities of the individuals to whom each communication at issue has been made. Lastly, the attorney-client privilege applies only to a *confidential* communication, *id.* 503(b)(1), meaning it was “not intended to be disclosed to third persons other than those: (A) to whom disclosure is made to further the rendition of professional legal services to the client; or (B) reasonably necessary to transmit the communication.” *Id.* 503(a)(5). Whether a communication meets this definition depends on the *intent* of the parties involved at the time the information was communicated. *Osborne v. Johnson*, 954 S.W.2d 180, 184 (Tex. App.—Waco 1997, orig. proceeding). Moreover, because the client may elect to waive the privilege at any time, a governmental body must explain that the confidentiality of a communication has been maintained. Section 552.107(1) generally excepts an entire communication that is demonstrated to be protected by the attorney-client privilege unless otherwise waived by the governmental body. *See Huie v. DeShazo*, 922 S.W.2d 920, 923 (Tex. 1996) (privilege extends to entire communication, including facts contained therein).

You claim the submitted information at issue is protected by section 552.107(1) of the Government Code. You state the information at issue consists of communications involving the district’s attorney and district employees and officials in their capacities as clients. You state the communications were made for the purpose of facilitating the rendition of

³We assume 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 those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

professional legal services to the district and that these communications have remained confidential. Based on your representations and our review, we find you have demonstrated the applicability of the attorney-client privilege to the information at issue. Thus, the district may generally withhold the e-mails under section 552.107(1) of the Government Code. We note, however, one of these e-mail strings includes an e-mail that was received from or sent to parties who have been de-identified under FERPA, and thus who you have not demonstrated are privileged parties. Furthermore, if the e-mail received from or sent to non-privileged parties is removed from the e-mail string and stands alone, it responsive to the request for information. Therefore, if this non-privileged e-mail, which we have marked, is maintained by the district separate and apart from the otherwise privileged e-mail string in which it appears, then the district may not withhold the non-privileged e-mail under section 552.107(1) of the Government Code, and the district must release it.

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,



Claire V. Morris Sloan
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CVMS/som

Ref: ID# 634196

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)