

LYONS & ROGERS LLC

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November 17, 2016

Via electronic mail only to infoshinesunlight@gmail.com

Mr. Jorge Manuel Teixeira

Re: Public Record Request – Dartmouth Public Schools

Dear Mr. Teixeira:

This letter is in response to your request for public records to the Dartmouth Public Schools which was received on November 7, 2016. This correspondence is intended to address your specific request as well as provide you with a cost estimate for the redaction and production of the requested records subject to public disclosure under M.G.L. c. 66 §10.

In your request, you ask for:

“Settlement agreements entered into by your School District with parents and guardians, from January 1, 2011 through today, relative to the provision of special education services and/or educational placement(s) for students with disabilities, redacted of all personally identifying information.”

In accordance with the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court’s decision, Champa v. Town of Weston, 473 Mass. 86 (2015), the district will produce redacted copies of settlement agreements regarding the placement of students in out-of-district placements from January 2011 to the present upon receipt of payment for the cost associated with the redaction.

The requested agreements contain information which is exempt from public disclosure pursuant to federal and state student and family privacy laws. In *Champa*, the SJC found that settlement agreements between parents and a public school regarding the placement of students in out-of-district private educational institutions constitute as educational records under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and student records under Massachusetts student record laws and regulations, and are therefore exempt from the definition of “public records” pursuant to M.G.L. c. 4, §7, Twenty-sixth

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exemption (a) and (c). The Court further concluded, however, that as it pertains to settlement agreements regarding the placement of students in out-of-district private educational institutions, these agreements may be redacted to remove the protected personally identifiable information (PII) they contain, after which they become subject to disclosure under the Massachusetts public record law.

In *Champa*, the Court's decision was limited to settlement agreements pertaining to the placement of students in out-of-district private educational institutions, whereas your request also seeks agreements "relative to the provision of special education services." The SJC did not address agreements which do not pertain to the placement of students in out-of-district private educational institutions. Hence, your request seeks records beyond the SJC's interpretation of permissible disclosure under the Massachusetts public record law.

As such, Dartmouth cannot provide you with copies of agreements that do not specifically pertain to a student's placement in an out-of-district private educational institution as they are outside the scope of the limited ruling in *Champa*, and remain exempt from disclosure under the Massachusetts public record law pursuant to federal and state student and family privacy laws for the reason that they are student records. M.G.L c. 4, §7, Twenty-sixth, (a) and (c).

The district has identified a total of 11 settlement agreements that are responsive to your request. Based on a timed trial, I estimate that it will take approximately 3.6 hours to redact the 11 agreements. Current law permits the district to charge a fee "based on the hourly rate of the lowest paid employee who is capable of performing the task" 950 CMR 32.06(1)(c).¹ The new public records law that goes into effect in January, however, limits the rate Dartmouth may charge to twenty-five dollars (\$25.00) per hour after the first two hours. Although it is not obligated to comply with the new law until January, Dartmouth is reducing its fee estimate to forty dollars (\$40.00) in the spirit of the new law. This figure represents 3.6 hours of redaction time, reduced to 1.6 hours, at twenty five dollars per hour. This does not reflect the actual cost to the District, but rather the district's willingness to absorb the anticipated actual cost.

Accordingly, the requested redacted agreements which are subject to public disclosure under the applicable law will be produced to you upon your remittance of \$40.00. Should you still seek the redacted agreements, kindly forward a check in this amount made payable to the Dartmouth Public Schools to Dr. Bonny L. Gifford, Superintendent of the Dartmouth Public Schools, 8 Bush Street, Dartmouth, MA 02748.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

¹ A school administrator would be the lowest paid employee who is capable of performing the redaction task. Redaction requires knowledge the FERPA regulation, state regulations, PII, and application of that knowledge to the settlement agreements. An administrator's hourly rate exceeds \$25.00.

Very truly yours,

Amy M. Rogers

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cc: Dr. Bonny L. Gifford, Superintendent of the Dartmouth Public Schools