

Case 6: What can your family see in your college records?

Rafa's parents help pay his college bill, and a family-access form asks whether they should also get information about his grades.

On your own Read What happened and underline what Rafa's dad asks for in the family chat. About 4 minutes.



Rafa and Caio sit on a sofa and look at Rafa's phone. Caio explains something with an open hand.

Your role: You're the one who reads each box on the form before Rafa signs. **New skill:** Read a form section by section before you sign.

What happened

Rafa, 18, has just started college, and his parents help pay his tuition bill. He commutes from the next block and helps at his family's shop after class. At the end of August, the college mailed Rafa a family-access form, but he has not opened the envelope yet.

On Sunday night, his parents ask about the form in the family group chat. His dad wants Rafa's login so the family can handle everything. Rafa is glad to share the bill, but he wants to read the rest of the form first.

Caio, an older friend who rents a room on the block, reads the form with Rafa, not for him. The form has separate sections for billing and for grades. Rafa wants to check the billing box. He wants to talk with his family before he decides about grades.

Your question: What will this form let Rafa's parents see, and what should he ask before he signs?

Key terms

On your own Read each key term and its example, then write your first guess in the box. About 5 minutes.

FERPA FERPA, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, is a federal law about who can see student education records.

En español: FERPA (Ley de Derechos Educativos y Privacidad de la Familia)

In this case: Rafa is 18 and in college, so under the general rule the FERPA rights to his records are his, not his parents’.

Education record An education record is a record directly about a student that a school or college keeps.

En español: expediente educativo

In this case: Rafa’s grades and schedule are education records. Section 2 of his form asks whether his parents may receive information about his grades.

Consent Consent is permission a person gives for something specific, such as sharing a record with a named person.

En español: consentimiento

In this case: Rafa’s form asks for consent in two separate sections, one for billing and one for grades. He can say yes to one and no to the other.

Who is involved



Rafa

First-year commuter with a family-access form

“My parents help with the bill. The college mailed this form, and the family chat already wants to know if I signed it. I haven’t even opened it.”



Caio

Reads the form with Rafa, not for him

“I can sit with Rafa while he asks. Being the older friend doesn’t make this my decision.”

Before you look at the evidence, what do you think Rafa's parents are allowed to see?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue lines, resembling notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Reading passage

Records, rights and the limits of family access

On your own Read the passage. At each Stop and think box, pause and answer the question in your head or with a partner. About 5 minutes.

Words to know

- **FERPA:** FERPA, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, is a federal law about who can see student education records.
- **Education record:** An education record is a record directly about a student that a school or college keeps.
- **Consent:** Consent is permission a person gives for something specific, such as sharing a record with a named person.
- **Decision-maker:** A decision-maker is the person or group with the power to make a particular choice.

The story: The login shortcut

Rafa, 18, is a first-year commuter who helps at his family's shop after class. His parents contribute to his tuition. At the end of August, his college mailed him a parent and family access authorization. Before he opens it, his parents raise it in the family group chat. His mother offers help with the bill. His father proposes the shortcut many families would reach for: send the login, and they will handle everything.

The case turns on the difference between those two offers. Helping pay a bill requires access to billing. A login grants access to everything the account holds, including grades and schedules, and it bypasses any record of what was shared and why. Rafa answers that he can share the bill and wants to read the rest first.

Caio, 24, sits with him as he reads. He models the stance of a good advisor. He will help Rafa ask questions, but the decision is Rafa's. He also resists vague reassurance. If the law has an exception, they should find out which one and whether it applies, because "privacy law" is not an answer Rafa's father can act on.

Your role is to read each box on the form before Rafa signs.

-  **Stop and think.** Why is a shared login a weaker form of trust than a signed, specific authorization?

Granular consent in practice

The form is built for separate decisions. Section 1 authorizes a named person to view account statements and make payments. Section 2 authorizes that person to receive information about grades, enrollment and academic standing. Section 3 makes the authorization durable until Rafa changes or withdraws it in writing. Each of the first two sections has its own yes-or-no box.

The college's annual FERPA notice sets the background rule. Students may inspect their records, request corrections and consent to disclosures, except where the law permits disclosure without consent. Together, the documents show what Rafa controls and what he still needs to learn: which exceptions this college applies and where a written change goes.

This case extends two earlier skills. Case 5 asked you to read a statement line by line. Here you read a form section by section and decide each part independently. Case 4 introduced the **decision-maker**, the person or group with the power to make a particular choice. Rafa holds that role, and the form's structure lets him exercise it with precision. **Consent** is permission a person gives for something specific, such as sharing a record with a named person. For college records, it is written and identifies the record, the recipient and the purpose. A shared password is the opposite of that kind of consent.

 **Stop and think.** The exceptions are permitted, not required. How should that change what Rafa asks the records office?

FERPA's structure and the question of trust

FERPA, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, is a federal law about who can see student education records. An **education record** is a record directly about a student that a school or college keeps, on paper or stored digitally. Under the general rule, the rights transfer from parents to the student at 18 or upon entering college at any age, and the student becomes an "eligible student" (U.S. Department of Education, Student Privacy Policy Office, no date listed). The Department's guide for eligible students explains consent, access and the exceptions in plain language (U.S. Department of Education, March 8, 2023).

The exceptions matter for families like Rafa's. A college may disclose records to parents when the student is a dependent for federal tax purposes, or in a health or safety emergency. The Department describes these disclosures as permitted, not required, so practice varies by institution. American University's parent-access guide illustrates one institution's process, not a national rule (American University, June 30, 2025).

Records governance now reaches beyond the registrar. A breach at PowerSchool exposed millions of student records (Education Week, January 9, 2025). Classroom AI tools raise new questions about who can see student information (Chalkbeat, December 13, 2024).

FERPA's structure and the question of trust, continued

The Markup has reported on where FERPA's protections run out when software companies handle student data (The Markup, January 15, 2022).

Professional codes describe both duties the registrar holds. AACRAO asks members to “protect the legitimate privacy interests of all individuals” and to “dispense complete, accurate, understandable, and truthful information and advice at all times” (AACRAO Ethics and Practice, 2010). The National Communication Association's credo speaks to Rafa's side: “We advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant decisions, while also respecting privacy and confidentiality” (NCA Credo for Ethical Communication, 2024). The case asks students to hold both values at once. Family support and privacy can be negotiated one box at a time.

? **Stop and think.** The NCA credo values both sharing and privacy. How could Rafa honor both in one conversation with his parents?

Sources

Real source | U.S. Department of Education, Student Privacy Policy Office | No date listed

What is FERPA?

Real source | U.S. Department of Education, Student Privacy Policy Office | March 8, 2023

An Eligible Student Guide to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

Real source | U.S. Department of Education, Student Privacy Policy Office | No date listed

Must postsecondary institutions provide a parent with access to an eligible student's education records?

Real source | American University, AU Central | June 30, 2025

FERPA and parent-access guide

Real source | Education Week | January 9, 2025

What Schools Should Know About the PowerSchool Data Breach

Real source | Chalkbeat | December 13, 2024

AI presents explosive risks to student data privacy. These educators want to defuse them.

Real source | The Markup | January 15, 2022

The Big Business of Tracking and Profiling Students

Real source | American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) | 2010

AACRAO Ethics and Practice

Real source | National Communication Association (NCA) | 2024

Credo for Ethical Communication

Look at the evidence

On your own Read the form and the notice, and fill in both boxes for each one. About 8 minutes.

Evidence A | College form

Parent and family access authorization, mailed to Rafa on August 28

Section 1, Billing and payments: allow the person named below to view account statements and make payments. Yes or No. Section 2, Academic records: allow the person named below to receive information about grades, enrollment and academic standing. Yes or No. Section 3: this authorization stays in effect until the student changes or withdraws it in writing.

Look closely: Which section covers billing, and which covers grades? Circle each yes-or-no box.

What it shows

What it leaves out

Evidence B | College notice

Annual FERPA notice on the registrar’s page

Students have the right to inspect their education records, to request corrections and to consent to disclosures, except where the law allows disclosure without consent. Questions go to the Office of the Registrar.

Look closely: Which phrase tells you the law has exceptions? Underline it.

What it shows

What it leaves out

What is still missing from the evidence?

[illegible]

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Key idea: education records

On your own Read the key idea and the code of ethics, then answer the question in the box. About 10 minutes.

FERPA, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, is a federal law about who can see student education records. It gives parents, and later students, rights over those records. An **education record** is a record directly about a student that a school or college keeps. Grades, transcripts and schedules can be education records, on paper or stored digitally. Under the general rule, the rights transfer to the student at age 18 or when the student starts college, at any age. The law calls that student an “eligible student.”

Helping pay tuition does not, by itself, give those rights back to a parent. **Consent** is permission a person gives for something specific, such as sharing a record with a named person. For college records, consent is written and says which record, to whom and for what purpose. Rafa’s form asks about billing and about grades in separate sections. He can say yes to one section and no to the other. He can also change his choice later in writing.

FERPA also has exceptions, which are situations in which a college may share records without the student’s consent. A college may share records with parents if the student is a dependent for federal tax purposes. It may also share them in a health or safety emergency. The U.S. Department of Education says this sharing is allowed, not required, so Rafa should ask his records office what his college does.

Professional standards

Real source | American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO)

AACRAO Ethics and Practice: Standards of professional practice

“Protect the legitimate privacy interests of all individuals and maintain appropriate confidentiality of institutional and student education records”

In plain words: College registrars who belong to AACRAO agree to protect students' privacy and keep education records confidential.

Question: Rafa's form separates billing from grades. What would the registrar need before sharing his grades with his parents?

Professional standards, continued

Your answer

The registrar would need ____, unless ____.

In the news



Real source | U.S. Department of Education (YouTube) | November 7, 2013

Student Privacy 101: FERPA for Parents and Students

The Education Department’s own short explainer of FERPA rights and when they move from parents to students.



Real source | U.S. Department of Education, Student Privacy Policy Office | No date listed

Must postsecondary institutions provide a parent with access to an eligible student’s education records?

Answers the case question directly, including the exception for students claimed as tax dependents.

Notes

Sort the evidence

On your own Fill in the diagram to show who decides each question, which rule applies and who can ask. About 6 minutes.

Who actually decides each question: Rafa, the rule or the college? Mark where paying the bill and seeing grades split into two separate decisions.

Who may see Rafa's grades?

Who decides

Rafa, the eligible student, through written consent

Under which rule

FERPA: rights transfer to the student at 18 or on entering college

Who lives with it

Rafa's family, who help pay tuition

Your way in

Who may see and pay the tuition bill?

Who decides

Rafa, the eligible student, through written consent

Under which rule

Who lives with it

Rafa's family, who help pay tuition

Your way in

Whose perspective is missing?

Whose view is missing from these documents? What would you ask them?

The view that is missing is _____. I would ask _____.

Practice: choose a response

On your own Choose who holds Rafa's rights and explain why, then fix the two marked lines. About 5 minutes.

Rafa is 18 and in college, and his parents help pay his tuition. Under the general FERPA rule, who holds the rights to his education records?

- ☐ **A** Rafa does.
- ☐ **B** His parents do, because they help pay the bill.
- ☐ **C** His parents do, until Rafa signs a form that says otherwise.

Why I chose it

Improve a draft

A student's first draft

Rafa, **①** your parents are paying so they can probably see everything, that's how it works at most schools. My parents could always see my grades on the portal in high school. FERPA is a privacy law but it's mostly for kids. **②** Once you're 18 it doesn't really matter anymore. If you want to keep your grades private you should just not give them your password. Honestly just ask your parents what they want to see. They're helping you a lot so it's probably fair for them to know how you're doing.

Rewrite each marked phrase so it says only what the evidence supports.

Rewrite phrase 1

Rewrite phrase 2

College

Your task

On your own Read the steps and fill in the planner boxes before you start your draft. About 12 minutes.

Write a plain-language explainer for first-year students and their families, suitable for an orientation program or a student government page. It separates billing access from access to academic records and explains how a student changes an authorization.

Use: Case documents: the authorization form, the FERPA notice, Rafa’s family chat and Caio’s statement. Real sources: two Department of Education FAQs, the Eligible Student Guide to FERPA (March 8, 2023) and the American University parent-access guide.

You’ll make: Explainer for students and families, 350—450 words, with three short questions and answers

Time: 75 minutes

- 1

Reread Evidence A and B, and label each one as an example.
- 2

Fill in the organizer: what billing access covers and what records access covers.
- 3

Note two exceptions from the Department of Education pages without deciding that either one applies to Rafa.
- 4

Draft the opening and the exceptions paragraph in the Your draft boxes.
- 5

Write three short questions and answers for families in the last box.
- 6

Finish the explainer on lined paper, 350 to 450 words.
- 7

Check your explainer with the questions on the Check your work page.



Prefer typing? Scan to open the online workspace.

Billing access covers

Records access covers

Two exceptions, stated generally

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Your draft

On your own Write your draft in the boxes, using your planner from the page before. About 30 minutes.

Opening: who holds the rights

The exceptions

In some situations, a college may share records without the student's consent, such as ____.

Three questions and answers

Check your work

On your own Answer the Check your work questions, mark your level in each rubric row and write one change you made. About 6 minutes.

Does your explainer say FERPA rights belong to the student at a school beyond high school?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Does it keep billing and records permissions separate?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Does it describe the exceptions accurately without saying that one applies to Rafa?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Does it label the form and notice as and the federal pages as real?	☐ Yes ☐ No

How your work is scored

Mark one box in each row.

Skill	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Evidence	☐ No source cited.	☐ Refers to “privacy law” generally.	☐ Cites the transfer rule and the separate-access guide.	☐ Cites both and notes that exceptions exist.
Reasoning	☐ States the rule backwards.	☐ Gets the transfer right but merges billing and grades.	☐ Separates paying from permission correctly.	☐ Explains why least access is a reasonable choice.
Audience & purpose	☐ Tells Rafa what to do.	☐ Gives advice without a next step.	☐ Leaves the decision with Rafa and names the records office.	☐ Respects Rafa’s family relationship while protecting his choice.

Skill	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Revision	☐ No change.	☐ Fixes one fact.	☐ Fixes the rule and adds a next step.	☐ Explains why each correction matters for Rafa's decision.

I changed ___ because ____.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has rounded corners and a thin black border around the edges.

Questions to discuss

On your own Write a short answer to each question, then complete the sentence frames below. About 8 minutes.

- 1** What is the smallest amount of access that would give Rafa the help he wants from his family?

- 2** Why might Rafa want to talk with his family before he checks the box for grades?

- 3** Someone says, “Parents can never see college records.” How would you revise that claim after reading this case?

My take

My claim: ____.

The best evidence is ____, because ____.

Someone who disagrees might say ____.

[illegible]

Talk about this case at home

Case 6: What can your family see in your college records?

In this case, Rafa's parents help pay his college bill, and a form asks if they should also see his grades. Your student read the form and a federal privacy rule, then explained how paying the bill differs from seeing grades.

Questions to talk about

- 1 Under the general rule, when do students start to control who sees their school records?
- 2 Why might a college form keep paying a bill separate from seeing grades?
- 3 Who at a college could answer a question about records?

Nobody needs to share personal stories or private information to talk about this case.



See the case online.