

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 page 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

Consent, one box at a time

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: Family support and a sealed envelope

Rafa, 18, is in his first weeks of college. He commutes from the next block and works at his family's shop after class. His parents help with tuition, and they want to keep helping. At the end of August, the college mailed him a parent and family access form. He has not opened it.

On Sunday night, his parents bring it up in the family group chat. His mom asks whether the tuition form arrived so they can help with the bill. His dad proposes the simplest route from a parent's point of view: send the login, and the family will take care of everything. Rafa answers that he can share the bill part and wants to read the rest first. His reply is honest and a little uncomfortable. It says yes to one kind of help and asks for time on another.

Caio, 24, the oldest in the crew, rents a room on the block and offers to sit with Rafa while he reads the form. He is careful about the limits of that help. Being the older friend does not make this his decision. When the conversation turns to exceptions in the law, Caio pushes for precision. Which exception, and does it even fit Rafa? Just saying "privacy law" will not answer his dad.

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

- ❓ **Stop and think.** Rafa says yes to one kind of help and asks for time on another. Why might that be harder than saying yes to everything?

A form is a set of separate decisions

The new skill in this case builds on Case 5. There, you read a pay statement line by line and matched each line to a record. Here, you read a form section by section and decide each part on its own. Section 1 would let a named person view account statements and make payments. Section 2 would let that person receive information about grades, enrollment and academic standing. Section 3 says the authorization lasts until Rafa changes or withdraws it in writing. The first two sections each carry a separate yes-or-no box.

The college's annual notice adds the legal frame. 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. The notice does not say which exceptions this college uses, and neither document says where Rafa sends a written change.

Two earlier terms sharpen the analysis. A **decision-maker** (Case 4) is the person or group with the power to make a particular choice, and on this form that person is Rafa. A trade-off (also Case 4) exists in each section separately. Sharing billing costs little and gives his parents what they asked for. Sharing grades may strengthen family trust, or it may shift a conversation Rafa would rather have in person first. **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 specifies which record, to whom and for what purpose. A shared login is the opposite of specific.

❓ **Stop and think.** The notice lists rights and exceptions but not which exceptions this college uses. What should Rafa ask to fill that gap?

The federal rule and its exceptions

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. Under the general rule, FERPA rights transfer from parents to the student at 18 or when the student enters college at any age, and the law calls that student an “eligible student” (U.S. Department of Education, Student Privacy Policy Office, no date listed). Paying tuition does not, by itself, return those rights to a parent.

The exceptions are real and narrow. A college may disclose records to parents if the student is a dependent for federal tax purposes, and it may disclose in a health or safety emergency. The Department of Education stresses that these disclosures are permitted, not required (U.S. Department of Education, Student Privacy Policy Office, no date listed). That is why the practical step is a question to the records office, not an argument from the law alone. American University's parent-access guide shows how one institution handles it, and it is one university's process, not a national rule (American University, June 30, 2025).

The federal rule and its exceptions, continued

Records management is also a data security problem. A breach at PowerSchool exposed millions of student records (Education Week, January 9, 2025). The Markup has reported on how school software companies gain access to student data, and where FERPA’s protections run out (The Markup, January 15, 2022). Registrars’ own professional code asks them to “protect the legitimate privacy interests of all individuals” (AACRAO Ethics and Practice, 2010).

 **Stop and think.** Why does Caio insist on naming the exact exception instead of saying “privacy law”?

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 | 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 | 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

Notes

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?

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 8 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 may see and pay the tuition bill?
Who decides Rafa, the eligible student, through written consent	Who decides Rafa, the eligible student, through written consent
Under which rule FERPA: rights transfer to the student at 18 or on entering college	Under which rule
Who lives with it Rafa’s family, who help pay tuition	Who lives with it Rafa’s family, who help pay tuition
Your way in 	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

Grades 11–12

Your task

On your own Read the steps and fill in the planner boxes before you start your draft. About 10 minutes.

Write a decision memo for Rafa: what should he authorize, for whom, and how can he change it later?

Use: All case sources, including the FAQ library entry on exceptions.

You'll make: Decision memo, 350–450 words

Time: 60 minutes

- 1 Reread Evidence A and B. Note what each section of the form controls.
- 2 List at least two authorization options in the planner.
- 3 Write one trade-off for Rafa and one for his family for each option.
- 4 Recommend one option and explain why the smallest access that still helps is a reasonable default.
- 5 Explain how Rafa can review or withdraw his consent.
- 6 Draft the three memo sections in the Your draft boxes.
- 7 Finish the memo on lined paper, 350 to 450 words in all.



Prefer typing? Scan to open the online workspace.

Option 1 and its trade-off

Option 2 and its trade-off

How Rafa can change his choice

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 25 minutes.

Situation and options

Recommendation and trade-offs

Exceptions and how to change your choice

Exceptions and how to change your choice, continued

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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.

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 memo present at least two authorization options?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Does it explain trade-offs for Rafa and for his family?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Does it describe the legal baseline and its exceptions accurately?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Does it explain how to review or withdraw consent?	☐ 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.
Revision	☐ No change.	☐ Fixes one fact.	☐ Fixes the rule and adds a next step.	☐ Explains why each correction matters for Rafa’s decision.

One change I made after feedback

[illegible]

Questions to discuss

On your own Write a short answer to each question, then complete the sentence frames below. About 10 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 ____.

My take, continued

Someone who disagrees might say ____.

The limit of the evidence is ____.

I would change my mind if ____.

Notes

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.