

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 5 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 6 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

Helping with the bill is not the same as seeing grades

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: A login request on Sunday night

Rafa, 18, is a few weeks into his first year of college. He commutes from the next block, helps at his family's shop after class and relies on his parents to help pay tuition. At the end of August, the college mailed him a family-access form. The envelope is still sealed.

On Sunday night, the family group chat catches up with him. His mom asks whether the tuition form came, because they want to help with the bill. His dad offers a shortcut: "Send us the login and we'll take care of everything." The offer is generous and practical, and it would hand over far more than a bill.

Rafa does not want a fight. He wants to understand what he is signing. He asks Caio, an older friend who rents a room on the block, to read the form with him. Caio is clear about his role. He will sit with Rafa while he asks questions, but being older does not make this his decision. When someone suggests sending his parents a photo of the form, Caio points out the trade-off. A photo is easier to send, and it is also easier to lose control of.

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

? Stop and think. Caio says a photo of the form is easier to send and easier to lose control of. What does he mean?

Separating the parts of the form

Case 5 taught you to read a document line by line before deciding what it means. The form rewards the same patience. Section 1 covers billing and payments: the named person could view account statements and make payments. Section 2 covers academic records: the named person could receive information about grades, enrollment and academic standing. Section 3 says the authorization stays in effect until Rafa changes or withdraws it in writing. Each of the first two sections has its own yes-or-no box.

That structure changes the decision. Rafa does not face a single choice between trusting his family and shutting them out. He faces two separate choices, and each has its own trade-off, a word you learned in Case 4. Saying yes to billing gives his parents what they asked for. Saying yes to grades may be fine too, but Rafa wants to talk with them before he decides.

Case 4 also gave you the term **decision-maker**, the person or group with the power to make a particular choice. On this form, the decision-maker is Rafa. **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 names the record, the person and the purpose.

 **Stop and think.** What is the smallest amount of access that would give Rafa the help he wants from his family?

What FERPA does and does not say

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, such as grades, transcripts or schedules. Under the general rule, the rights transfer from parents to the student at age 18 or when the student enters college at any age (U.S. Department of Education, Student Privacy Policy Office, no date listed). The Education Department publishes a plain guide for these “eligible students” (U.S. Department of Education, March 8, 2023).

Helping pay tuition does not, by itself, give those rights back to a parent. FERPA does have exceptions. A college may share records with parents if the student is a dependent for federal tax purposes, or in a health or safety emergency. The Education Department says this sharing is allowed, not required, so each college decides how it handles these cases.

Why do these rules matter so much? Student records now live in large software systems. A breach at the company PowerSchool exposed millions of student records (Education Week, January 9, 2025). Knowing which record, which permission and which office to ask is how Rafa keeps family support from turning into giving away every login.

Sources

What is FERPA?

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

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

What Schools Should Know About the PowerSchool Data Breach

Notes

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.

Look at the evidence

On your own Read the form and the notice, and fill in both boxes for each one. About 10 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 8 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

Before sharing grades, the registrar would need ____.

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 6 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 9–10

Your task

On your own Read the steps and fill in the planner boxes before you start your draft. About 8 minutes.

Write Rafa a one-page guide separating paying the bill from seeing grades.

Use: The university parent-access guide excerpt and the Department of Education FAQ.

You’ll make: One-page guide, 200–250 words

Time: 50 minutes

- 1 Reread Evidence A and B. Mark the billing section and the grades section.
- 2 Fill in the organizer: what billing access covers and what academic access covers.
- 3 Write one or two sentences on who holds the FERPA rights now.
- 4 Add one sentence that says exceptions exist, without guessing which one applies.
- 5 List three questions Rafa can ask the records office.
- 6 Write your guide, 200 to 250 words, in the Your draft box.
- 7 Check your guide with the questions on the Check your work page.



Prefer typing? Scan to open the online workspace.

Billing access covers

Academic access covers

Three questions for the records office

Your guide, 200 to 250 words

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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 8 minutes.

Does your guide state the transfer rule accurately?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Does it keep billing and grades separate?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Does it name the records office as the next step?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Does it flag exceptions without guessing which one applies?	☐ 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

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Questions to discuss

On your own Write a short answer to each question, then complete the sentence frames below. About 12 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 ____.

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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.