

School Board

Access to District Public Records ¹

Full access to the District's public records is available to any person as provided in the Illinois Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), this policy, and implementing procedures. The Superintendent or designee shall: (1) provide the Board with sufficient information and data to permit the Board to monitor the District's compliance with FOIA and this policy, and (2) report any FOIA requests during the Board's regular meetings along with the status of the District's response. ²

Freedom of Information Officer ³

The Superintendent shall serve as the District's Freedom of Information Officer and assume all the duties and powers of that office as provided in FOIA and this policy. The Superintendent may delegate these duties and powers to one or more designees, but the delegation shall not relieve the Superintendent of responsibility for the delegated action.

Definition ⁴

The District's *public records* are defined as records, reports, forms, writings, letters, memoranda, books, papers, maps, photographs, microfilms, cards, tapes, recordings, electronic data processing records, electronic communications, recorded information and all other documentary material

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¹ The Ill. Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) governs the subject matter in this policy. 5 ILCS 140/. School districts are required to make public records available to any person for inspection or copying, unless they fall within an exception. 5 ILCS 140/3(a). The f/n's only discuss sections of FOIA that are relevant to school districts. State law does not explicitly require boards to adopt a policy on access to their records. However, a board policy is the logical instrument to memorialize the actions that are required to implement FOIA. The laws limiting the disclosure of employee evaluations are discussed in f/n 7.

See also *Let the Sunshine In: School Board Meetings and Records* published by IASB at:

www.iasb.com/IASB/media/Documents/JPBSunshine.pdf.

Any person denied access to a public record may request a review by the Ill. Public Access Counselor (PAC) established in the office of the Ill. Atty. Gen. 5 ILCS 140/9.5. As a result of the review, the PAC may issue an opinion binding on the requester and public body. IASB reports on the opinions relevant to school districts at:

www.iasb.com/policy-services-and-school-law/court-decisions-listing/.

² This sentence allows a board to monitor the district's compliance with FOIA. This is an important duty as illustrated by FOIA's provision stating: "It is a fundamental obligation of government to operate openly and provide public records as expeditiously and efficiently as possible." The School Code requires the FOIA report described in #2 (105 ILCS 5/10-16); it is optional, however, for districts governed by a board of school directors.

³ Each board must designate one or more official(s) or employee(s) to act as its freedom of information officer(s). 5 ILCS 140/3.5 (referred to in the f/n's as **FOIA Officer**). A board may replace *Superintendent* in this paragraph with another job title, or may replace the paragraph with one of the alternatives below:

Alternative 1: The Board will appoint an employee to serve as the District's Freedom of Information Officer. That appointee assumes all the duties and powers of that office as provided in FOIA and this policy.

Alternative 2: The Superintendent shall appoint an employee, who may be himself or herself, to [continue as with alternative 1].

⁴ The definition is quoted from 5 ILCS 140/2(c), amended by P.A. 104-438. Substitute the following alternative for this paragraph if desired:

The definition of *public records*, for purposes of this policy, is the definition contained in 5 ILCS 140/2(c) without amendment.

Junk mail means any unsolicited commercial mail or commercial electronic communication sent to a district and not responded to by a district. 5 ILCS 140/2(j), added by P.A. 104-438.

pertaining to the transaction of public business, regardless of physical form or characteristics, having been prepared by or for, or having been or being used by, received by, in the possession of, or under the control of the School District. The District's public records do not include *junk mail*.

Requesting Records⁵

A request for inspection and/or copies of public records must be made in writing and may be submitted by personal delivery, mail, telefax, or email directed to the District's Freedom of Information Officer. Individuals making a request are not required to state a reason for the request other than to identify when the request is for a commercial purpose or when requesting a fee waiver. Email requests must include the entirety of the request within the body of the email and not as an attachment or hyperlink. The Superintendent or designee shall instruct District employees to immediately forward any request for inspection and copying of a public record to the District's Freedom of Information Officer or designee.

Responding to Requests

The Freedom of Information Officer shall approve all requests for public records unless:

1. The requested material does not exist;⁶
2. The requested material is exempt from inspection and copying by the Freedom of Information Act;⁷
3. Complying with the request would be unduly burdensome;⁸

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⁵ This section restates 5 ILCS 140/3(c), amended by P.A. 104-438, in relevant part. Districts may, but are not required to, accept oral requests. Compliance with an oral request may stave off the formal written request and permit more flexibility in the response. If the district wants to accept oral requests, delete ~~must be made in writing~~ and from the first sentence and add the following:

Oral requests may be accepted provided personnel are available to handle them, but otherwise must be made in writing.

The response to an oral request should be documented. Districts may provide a request form for convenience but may not require its use. See sample exhibit 2:250-E1, *Written Request for District Public Records*.

⁶ FOIA does not require a public body to create a record. 5 ILCS 140/1; *Chicago Tribune Co. v. Dept. of Financial and Professional Regulation*, 8 N.E.3d 11 (Ill. App. 4th Dist. 2014). However, compiling information already in the public body's possession into a different format in order to respond to a FOIA request does not constitute the creation of a new record. PAO 15-10. See also *Hites v. Waubensee Community College*, 56 N.E.3d 1049 (Ill. App. 2nd Dist. 2016) (holding that databases that house aggregations of data and do not merely store documents are subject to FOIA).

⁷ 5 ILCS 140/7 and 140/7.5 describe numerous explicit exceptions to the presumption that all public records are available for public inspection. Each record is "presumed to be open to inspection or copying" and the district will have "the burden of proving by clear and convincing evidence that it is exempt." 5 ILCS 140/1.2 and 140/11(f). A person who prevails in a court proceeding to enforce FOIA will be awarded attorney's fees; the public body may incur a civil penalty of between \$2,500 and \$5,000 for each occurrence of a willful or intentional violation of FOIA or other action in bad faith; and courts may impose additional penalties of up to \$1,000 for each day the violation continues if (1) the board fails to comply with the court's order after 30 days, (2) the court's order is not on appeal or stayed, and (3) the court does not grant the public body additional time to comply with the court's order to disclose public records. 5 ILCS 140/11(i) and (j). School officials should seek the board attorney's advice concerning the denial of a record request.

Two State laws limit the disclosure of employee personnel evaluations:

1. The Personnel Record Review Act prohibits the disclosure of performance evaluations. 820 ILCS 40/11.
2. The School Code prohibits the disclosure of public school teacher, principal, and superintendent performance evaluations except as otherwise provided in the certified employee evaluation laws. 105 ILCS 5/24A-7.1.

5 ILCS 140/7(kk) exempts from disclosure "the public body's credit card numbers, debit card numbers, bank account numbers, Federal Employer Identification Number, security code numbers, passwords, and similar account information" that could result in identity theft or fraud of a government entity or a person.

⁸ 5 ILCS 140/3(g).

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4. The request would require the District to open electronically attached files or hyperlinks to view or access details of a request. In that case, the requester shall be notified within five business days that the entirety of the electronic request must appear within the body of the electronic submission;⁹ or
5. The District has a reasonable belief that the request was not submitted by a person, and the requester fails to verify orally or in writing that they are a person within 30 days of the District's request for such verification. ¹⁰

Within five business days after receipt of a request for access to a public record, the Freedom of Information Officer shall comply with or deny the request, unless the time for response is extended as specified in Section 3 of FOIA.¹¹ The Freedom of Information Officer may extend the time for a response for up to five business days from the original due date.¹² If an extension is needed, the Freedom of Information Officer shall: (1) notify the person making the request of the reason for the extension, and (2) either inform the person of the date on which a response will be made, or agree with the person in writing on a compliance period. ¹³

The time periods are extended for responding to requests for records made for a commercial purpose, requests by a recurrent requester, or voluminous requests, as those terms are defined in Section 2 of FOIA. The time periods for responding to those requests are governed by Sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.6 of FOIA. ¹⁴

When responding to a request for a record containing both exempt and non-exempt material, the Freedom of Information Officer shall redact exempt material from the record before complying with the request. ¹⁵

Fees ¹⁶

Persons making a request for copies of public records must pay any and all applicable fees. The Freedom of Information Officer shall establish a fee schedule that complies with FOIA and this policy

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⁹ 5 ILCS 140/3(c), amended by P.A. 104-438.

¹⁰ 5 ILCS 140/3(j), added by P.A. 104-438.

¹¹ 5 ILCS 140/3(d). Reasons for extensions are addressed at 5 ILCS 140/3(e). Public bodies must respond to FOIA requests. PAOs 16-05, 16-04, 16-03, and 16-01. Public bodies must also conduct a reasonable search for public records responsive to a FOIA request, which includes searching public employees' communications on personal devices or accounts for records pertaining to the transaction of public business. PAO 16-06.

¹² 5 ILCS 140/3(e).

¹³ 5 ILCS 140/3(f). A board may replace the default paragraph with the following alternative:

The Freedom of Information Officer shall respond to record requests according to the time periods described in 5 ILCS 140/3.

¹⁴ The timelines are extended to respond to a: (1) *recurrent requester* (defined in 5 ILCS 140/2(g)); (2) request with a *commercial purpose* (defined in 5 ILCS 140/2(c-10)); and (3) *voluminous request* (defined in 5 ILCS 140/2(h)). To use the extended timelines, a district must follow the requirements in 5 ILCS 140/3.2 for responding to a *recurrent requester*; 5 ILCS 140/3.1 for responding to a request with a *commercial purpose*; and 5 ILCS 140/3.6 for responding to a *voluminous request*. See sample administrative procedure 2:250-API, *Access to and Copying of District Public Records*, for additional information.

¹⁵ 5 ILCS 140/7. Redacting exempt portions is permitted, but not required, except that contractors' employees' addresses, telephone numbers, and social security numbers must be redacted before disclosure. 5 ILCS 140/2.10. Reviewing past responses to FOIA requests will promote uniform treatment of requests for similar records.

¹⁶ 5 ILCS 140/6. The first paragraph's intent is to be efficient and avoid paraphrasing a complex law. See sample administrative procedure 2:250-API, *Access to and Copying of District Public Records*, for a fee schedule identifying the maximum fees permitted.

and is subject to the Board's review. The fee schedule shall include copying fees and all other fees to the maximum extent they are permitted by FOIA, including without limitation, search and review fees for responding to a request for a commercial purpose and fees, costs, and personnel hours in connection with responding to a voluminous request.

Copying fees, except when fixed by statute, shall be reasonably calculated to reimburse the District's actual cost for reproducing and certifying public records and for the use, by any person, of its equipment to copy records. In no case shall the copying fees exceed the maximum fees permitted by FOIA. If the District's actual copying costs are equal to or greater than the maximum fees permitted by FOIA, the Freedom of Information Officer is authorized to use FOIA's maximum fees as the District's fees. No copying fees shall be charged for: (1) the first 50 pages of black and white, letter or legal sized copies, or (2) electronic copies other than the actual cost of the recording medium, except if the response is to a voluminous request, as defined in FOIA.

A fee reduction is available if the request qualifies under Section 6 of FOIA. The Freedom of Information Officer shall set the amount of the reduction taking into consideration the amount of material requested and the cost of copying it. ¹⁷

Provision of Copies and Access to Records

A public record that is the subject of an approved access request will be available for inspection or copying at the District's administrative office during regular business hours, unless other arrangements are made by the Freedom of Information Officer. ¹⁸

Many public records are immediately available from the District's website including, but not limited to, the process for requesting a public record.¹⁹ The Freedom of Information Officer shall direct a requester to the District's website if a requested record is available there. If the requester is unable to

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5 ILCS 140/6(a) states: "If a request is *not* a request for a *commercial purpose* or a *voluminous request*, a public body *may not* charge the requester for the costs of any search for and review of the records or other personnel costs associated with reproducing the records." (Emphasis added.) This implies that a search and review fee may be charged when responding to a request for a *commercial purpose* or a *voluminous request*. However, 5 ILCS 140/6(b) states that the search and review fee described in 5 ILCS 140/6(f) may be charged *only to* someone making a *commercial request*. 5 ILCS 140/6(f) contains the maximum amounts that may be charged for search and review but does not explain when they may be charged. The FOIA Officer will need to consult the board attorney concerning fees.

¹⁷ 5 ILCS 140/6(c) makes it mandatory to furnish records "without charge or at a reduced charge" if the request is in the *public interest* as defined by FOIA. If a board wants to indicate when a reduction is available by paraphrasing the statute, it may substitute the following alternative for the default paragraph:

A fee reduction is available if the person requesting the record states a specific purpose for the request and indicates that a fee reduction is in the public interest by having as its principal purpose the preservation of the general public's health, safety, welfare, or legal rights and is not for the principal purpose of personal or commercial benefit. The Freedom of Information Officer shall set the amount of the reduction, taking into consideration the amount of material requested and the cost of copying it.

¹⁸ Public bodies may adopt rules for the times and places where records will be made available. 5 ILCS 140/3(h). A board may amend this sentence to reflect other times and/or places where records will be made available.

¹⁹ 5 ILCS 140/4. A district may reduce FOIA requests by posting records on its website. Many records are required to be web-posted, see sample exhibit 2:250-E2, *Immediately Available District Public Records and Web-Posted Reports and Records*. If the district does not have a website, replace this paragraph as follows:

Some public records are available for immediate access including a description of the process for requesting a public record, and a list of all types or categories of records under its control.

For a list of required web-postings see sample exhibit 2:250-E2, *Immediately Available District Public Records and Web-Posted Reports and Records*. Using the district's website is also a convenient way to comply with FOIA's requirement to identify documents that are *immediately* available. 5 ILCS 140/3.5(a). Although not required to be web-posted, a list of all types or categories of records under its control must be prepared and made available. 5 ILCS 140/5; see sample administrative procedure 2:250-AP1, *Access to and Copying of District Public Records*.

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reasonably access the record online, he or she may resubmit the request for the record, stating his or her inability to reasonably access the record online, and the District shall make the requested record available for inspection and copying as otherwise provided in this policy. ²⁰

Preserving Public Records

Public records, including email messages, shall be preserved and cataloged if: (1) they are evidence of the District's organization, function, policies, procedures, or activities, (2) they contain informational data appropriate for preservation, (3) their retention is required by State or federal law, or (4) they are subject to a retention request by the Board Attorney (e.g., a litigation hold), District auditor, or other individual authorized by the School Board or State or federal law to make such a request.²¹ Unless its retention is required as described in items numbered 3 or 4 above, a public record, as defined by the Illinois Local Records Act, may be destroyed when authorized by the Local Records Commission. ²²

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²⁰ 5 ILCS 140/8.5.

²¹ The Local Records Act (50 ILCS 205/3) requires the preservation of records described in items #1-3. The preservation of records described in item #3 is also required by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (20 U.S.C. §1232g) and the Ill. School Student Records Act (105 ILCS 10/), among other laws. An example of a record described in item #4 is a record subject to a *litigation hold* or a document preservation requirement pursuant to Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, Rules 16 and 26.

Categorizing email messages is complicated because two laws apply, and the rules differ when a board member is a party. See sample policy 2:140, *Communications To and From the Board*, for a discussion of email between or among board members. When employees or agents are using email for school purposes, the email messages may be *public records*, but will not necessarily be subject to disclosure depending on the topic discussed. FOIA's list of exemptions from disclosure determines whether these emails are subject to disclosure. For exemptions see 5 ILCS 140/7.

Not all email messages between or among employees must be preserved, even if they are *public records* for purposes of FOIA. The definition of *public record* in the Local Records Act (50 ILCS 205/3) is narrower than its definition in FOIA. Thus, staff email, like all district records, must be retained only when it contains material described in #1-4. While this is a slippery slope without definitive parameters, employee email that is conversational or personal, or contains brainstorming may generally be deleted.

The Prevailing Wage Act (820 ILCS 130/5) requires contractors, while participating in public works, to keep certified payroll records of all laborers, mechanics, and other workers employed by them on the project and to submit this record to the Ill. Dept. of Labor (IDOL) through an electronic database. These records are considered public records, except for contractors' employees' addresses, telephone numbers, social security numbers, race, ethnicity, and gender, and they must be made available in accordance with FOIA. **Id. Note:** 820 ILCS 130/5 requires contractors to maintain records of the race, ethnicity, gender, and veteran status of workers on a public works project. FOIA, however, was not similarly amended to require public bodies to redact the workers' race, ethnicity, and gender from certified payroll records before disclosure. See 5 ILCS 140/2.10. The Ill. Atty. Gen. has previously issued at least one non-binding opinion finding that disclosure of a person's gender is not an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy under 5 ILCS 140/7(1)(c). Districts should consult with their board attorneys regarding what categories of information may be properly redacted in response to a FOIA request for certified payroll records.

²² 50 ILCS 205/. Preservation and destruction of documents is covered in sample administrative procedure 2:250-AP2, *Protocols for Record Preservation and Development of Retention Schedules*. See also the Ill. Secretary of State's website for information on preserving and destroying records at:

www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/records_management/.

LEGAL REF.: 5 ILCS 140/, Illinois Freedom of Information Act.
50 ILCS 205/, Local Records Act.
105 ILCS 5/10-16 and 5/24A-7.1.
820 ILCS 40/11, Personnel Record Review Act.
820 ILCS 130/5, Prevailing Wage Act.

CROSS REF.: 2:140 (Communications To and From the Board), 5:150 (Personnel Records),
7:340 (Student Records)