

ALA American Library Association

May 6, 2003

Secretary of Education Rod Paige
U.S. Department of Education
Re: **Draft Statement of Work for ERIC**

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The American Library Association (ALA) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of ALA, are pleased to offer comments on the Draft Statement of Work for the design of the new ERIC system, as proposed by the Department of Education.


The American Library Association, founded in 1876, is the oldest and largest library association in the world. With membership of more than 64,000, ALA is the chief advocate for the people of the United States in their search for the highest quality of library and information services.

The Association of College & Research Libraries enhances the effectiveness of academic and research librarians to advance learning, teaching, and research in higher education. With 12,000 members, ACRL is the largest division of the American Library Association.

These comments are informed by ACRL's Education and Behavioral Sciences Section (EBSS), 1,000 members dedicated to serving the common interests of education and behavioral sciences librarians and addressing a host of issues in the areas of collection development, library and curriculum materials center management, user services, and information literacy instruction in education and behavioral sciences librarianship.

ALA is very pleased that the Department of Education recognizes the importance of ERIC and stands ready to offer whatever assistance necessary to work toward strengthening ERIC and its services. As experts in information access, librarians could provide valuable input to the Steering Committee in this important planning process. Please contact us if you have questions or require additional information. Thank you very much, Secretary Paige, for this opportunity to comment on the Department's Draft Statement of Work.

Sincerely,



Emily Sheketoff, Executive Director, Washington Office
American Library Association

CC: Jeff Halsted, U.S. Department of Education
Dr. Grover J. (Russ) Whitehurst, U.S. Department of Education

Enclosure—Comments of the American Library Association

Comments of the American Library Association on the U.S. Department of Education's Draft Statement of Work for the Design of ERIC

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) has provided, for over 35 years, the most extensive access to education related information in the world. The database alone currently indexes more than 1.2 million records. The current ERIC system acquires, organizes and disseminates education information. It is an invaluable resource to educators, researchers, librarians, parents, policy-makers and others with an interest in the field of education. It is unique among education information systems in that it is built on a decentralized system of expertise, the ERIC Clearinghouses, hosted at universities, research institutions and associations.

A strength of the ERIC database has been the quality of the indexing provided through the ERIC Thesaurus, a living and evolving controlled vocabulary. The Thesaurus facilitated access in the print era and continues to facilitate focused searching in this electronic world of increasing full-text. Researchers, in particular, have come to rely on the consistency, quality and depth of this indexing which is a benchmark in the field, making it an invaluable tool for librarians and library patrons across the country.

However, not content to be a large and heavily used database, ERIC also provides expert reference and referral services (e.g., *AskERIC* and *AskERIC Live!*), syntheses of research on topics of high public interest and impetus for issue-based professional discussions. The ERIC Clearinghouses respond to over 150,000 phone calls and e-mails annually (<http://searcheric.org/abit.htm>) from the general public and the vast library community. The Clearinghouses have also done much to harness the rich but unruly resources of the World Wide Web by providing links to screened resources relevant to their subject scope. More than 10 million people a month connect to the ERIC provided web pages (<http://searcheric.org/abit.htm>) making it the most popular federally sponsored education program.

ALA recognizes the need to develop a more economical model for the ERIC system and applauds the Department of Education's efforts to modernize ERIC, making it faster and more efficient. There is much within the Department's Statement of Work that will enhance the current ERIC database features. Positive changes include contemporary approaches to metadata, electronic submission of materials, more full-text, and specified timelines for incorporating materials into the system. The addition of quality indicators, such as the peer-review status of journals indexed is also welcome.

However, in light of the current administration's dedication to improving the educational opportunities and performance for America's children as part of the "No Child Left Behind" initiative, it is important not to impair ERIC's effectiveness and jeopardize the significant benefits the database and clearinghouses offer practitioners, researchers, students and the general public.

Therefore, ALA expresses the following concerns and recommendations regarding the Department of Education's Statement of Work for the design of a new ERIC system:

- 1) While stating that the new ERIC will be comprehensive, easy-to-use and searchable, the Statement of Work also directs the contractor to encourage author submitted abstracts and use publisher and author abstracts and indexing information to the maximum extent possible. ALA believes producer provided and automatic indexing will reduce the value of ERIC significantly by reducing the quality and consistency of the abstracting and indexing of database entries.

The consistency and specificity of the current ERIC indexing protocols are invaluable both to researchers and to less knowledgeable users who tend to use very specific search terms. Effective indexing is a skill that cannot be taught quickly, nor are authors likely to have the objective distance from their subject necessary for the task. The ERIC Thesaurus remains an invaluable tool for accessing information in ERIC. Consistency in indexing is critical to preserving the functionality of the system; major revisions to current indexing practices could lead to a great loss in the effectiveness of database search retrieval.

- 2) The Statement of Work also replaces the Clearinghouse system with a more centralized entity, coordinated and controlled by a single contractor. The new contractor would replace Clearinghouse expertise by using three content experts in each of the current Clearinghouse topic areas to select materials for inclusion in the database. Despite their simple names, the current Clearinghouses each cover a broad range of subjects that could not easily be encompassed by the expertise of three individuals, however carefully chosen.

Consider for example one of the smaller Clearinghouses, the Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. Beyond what is explicit in its name, this Clearinghouse is also responsible for database content and information dissemination for agriculture extension, Mexican American, Native American and Migrant education issues. It is unlikely that three people could adequately provide expert guidance in all those areas. The fact that they will meet only once, will have input only on selection of materials for comprehensive indexing, and will be removed from the day-to-day operation of database generation and user inquiry will make their task doubly difficult.

The move from the expertise embedded in the Clearinghouse system to the selection of three content experts is greatly inferior. If ERIC is to continue to be the database of record for the field of education, it will require sufficient knowledgeable support.

- 3) ALA believes that the elimination of many of the current Clearinghouse functions, especially in the area of information dissemination will be harmful to the needs of practitioners, researchers, students and the general public. Currently the Clearinghouses offer users valuable information services by responding to over 150,000 emails and phone calls annually. Moreover, the loss of the Clearinghouses would lead to the elimination of many of their publishing functions, including the ERIC Digests, electronic journals and monographs, user oriented web sites and outreach activities. We believe that these activities are critical to broad education constituencies presently served by the ERIC system and that they should be maintained.

The What Works Clearinghouse will eventually provide a body of information that will supplement and interact with the current Clearinghouse services, but the two are not redundant. What Works may prove to be a blessing for practitioners, but researchers, and students will still need and want the full wealth of expertise embodied in the Clearinghouse staffs and information products. The expertise about user needs, and information structure that taxpayer dollars have built in the ERIC Clearinghouses over the life of the ERIC system should not be discarded.

- 4) ALA is concerned about the short time frames and entrepreneurial nature of some of the changes outlined in the Statement of Work. Will new indexing and abstracting be added to the database during the transition period? Who will do that work and when will it appear in the database? Some of the new contractor's processes for identifying sources of information and setting indexing protocols will take place after the Clearinghouses have ceased their functions.

Longer time allowances for some transfer functions would minimize the potential for confusion and interrupted access. While we welcome increased electronic access to the text of materials indexed in the ERIC database, ALA recognizes potential problems. For example, linking to commercial vendors will create distinctions between those users who have institutional access to materials, mainly on college and university campuses, and those who do not have access, except by purchase. Vendor access interfaces that do not make it clear that some institutional affiliates may be entitled to on-campus access to text products could be confusing for users and the librarians trying to help them.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments on the Draft Statement of Work for the redesign of the ERIC database. ALA and its division ACRL are ready to provide additional information and support to the Department of Education during this important process.