



Association of Research Libraries
American Association of Law Libraries
Special Libraries Association

May 7, 2003

The Honorable Rod Paige
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202

RE: Draft Statement of Work for ERIC

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of the Association of Research Libraries, the American Association of Law Libraries and the Special Libraries Association, we are pleased to submit comments in response to the Draft Statement of Work (SOW) for the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). Our organizations have long-standing interests in ERIC and our members and users rely upon ERIC, indeed, consider it a vital tool for identifying and accessing educational resources.

Overall, our comments reflect the view that as the Department reconfigures ERIC that these changes should result in a system that is strengthened, supports innovation, and continues to be a useful and effective tool for the research and library communities in North America and to others throughout the world. Thus we very much appreciate the Department's continuing commitment to ERIC and the recognition of the need to maintain this critically important service.

We are pleased to see many positive aspects to the Draft SOW. The proposed approach to a new, more modern metadata schema is an improvement as is the increase in use of full-text including journal articles. In addition, the specified timeline for including materials in ERIC more expeditiously should enhance the usefulness of the service to the education and research communities.

As the Department of Education strives to improve the efficiency, timeliness, and effectiveness of ERIC through greater centralization, it will be important to balance these benefits with those of the current system, namely a distributed resource that builds upon local subject expertise. For example, the draft SOW calls for three content experts in each of the topics specified. Given the range of subject areas covered, it seems unlikely that three content experts could have the depth and breadth of knowledge necessary to accomplish these tasks. Historically, one of the key strengths of ERIC has been its extensive subject expertise. It would be unfortunate to lose or diminish that capability.

In addition, the draft SOW calls for the "use of author abstracts and information to the maximum extent possible." Whereas it may appear that employing author created

abstracts and indexing of information may both expedite the inclusion of information in ERIC and be more cost-effective, in fact, it will likely reduce the value of ERIC. Unfortunately, the quality of author abstracting and indexing is unlikely to match the caliber of the existing system. Over time, this would reduce not only the ability of researchers to retrieve needed information but also the usefulness of ERIC. This holds true as well for the proposal to rely upon automated indexing. This proposal overlooks a key strength of ERIC which is the quality control of its indexing.

Another concern with the Draft SOW is the proposal to "link to full-text journal articles (either to publishers or to other sources of journal articles) and to other approved permanent online archives of education materials." ERIC should not relinquish or contract for record archives especially as no other archive has the permanency or mandate as ERIC. The Draft SOW should be very clear in providing for the permanent archiving of the ERIC database, and should not allow this to be the sole responsibility of one contractor. In addition, it will be important to clarify the statement referring to access either through publishers or other sources of journal articles. The Draft SOW also notes that if articles are not free, "whenever possible, [they] will be immediately available for purchase through an online link with publishers and other information sources." As there are numerous venues for researchers to access needed resources without cost such as through libraries, it would be helpful for the Draft SOW to be more explicit about the various options for users.

Finally, the draft SOW represents a significant departure for ERIC and its services upon which the research, education, and library communities depend. Although it is important to regularly review and improve upon all government services, such changes should be implemented carefully, with ample community input and participation, and with enough time to ensure a smooth transition. Given the extensive user base of ERIC, the Department may wish to reconsider some of the proposed changes in the Draft SOW. Retaining services such as customer support, AskERIC, the provision of research summaries, digests and publications would make the revitalized ERIC a more robust service and at the same time, fulfill the need for a more efficient and cost-effective system.

ARL, AALL and SLA would be very interested in working with you and your staff as the Department implements improvements and changes to ERIC. We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on the Draft SOW and look forward to working with you and your staff on this important initiative.

Sincerely yours,

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cc: Jeff Halsted, U.S. Department of Education
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