

Thank you for your letter of May 1, 2003 on the ERIC system, directed to Secretary Paige.

The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a component of the National Library of Education within the Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education. Established in 1966, ERIC is a national information system designed to provide access to education-related literature. ERIC currently operates through 19 separate contracts totaling \$10.5 million in annual expenditures. This include contracts for the 16 content-focused ERIC clearinghouses on topics such as higher education, information technology, and reading and communication, and 3 support contracts for document reproduction, outreach, and database management.

The contracts for the current ERIC clearinghouses expire at the end of December of 2003. The Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, which passed unanimously in the Senate and House, is the controlling legislation for the ERIC system. Neither the final statute nor any version of the bill introduced in committee or the floor of the House or Senate required or recommended the continuation of the current ERIC system. In fact, the issue of ERIC was discussed at several legislative meetings I attended on the Hill and the decision not to provide for the continuation of the current ERIC system in statute was, I believe, thoughtful, deliberate, bicameral, and bipartisan. The statutory language requires only that information be widely disseminated on the topics covered by the current clearinghouses, along with topics related to the core academic areas, practices that improve academic achievement and close the achievement gap, and education technology.

There are a significant number of improvements that need to be made in the electronic database of information on education that cannot be made or cannot be made efficiently within the context of the current system. The following are some of the problems with the current system that we intend to address with the new ERIC contract.

that are summarized and are impoverished with respect to information. Full text access is critical to responsible use of an electronic information dissemination system. A system that relies on simplified, homogenized abstracts of information is sure to mislead.

5. **Inefficient use of resources.** The current ERIC system of 19 separate contracts requires 9 full-time Department of Education program specialists plus support and management staff to administer, this for a \$10.5 million annual expenditure. On the contractor end, the building and maintenance of many different web sites and the duplication of accession and cataloging functions across each clearinghouse involves unnecessary and wasteful expenditures that could be invested in enhanced user services. As an example of undesirable redundancy, five different ERIC Digests on bullying and school violence were published by 4 different clearinghouses between 1997-2002. Five different Digests on after school programs were published between 1996-2001.
6. **Use of resources for low priority functions.** Over half of the typical clearinghouse budget is devoted to functions other than the electronic database, such as outreach, publications, meetings, journals, travel, and reference services. In the context of flat funding for ERIC, this means that money has been spread thin and the core function of providing electronic access to the education-related literature has been compromised. In her examination of the organization's history, mission, and structure, Robbins (2000) concludes that ERIC "cannot and should not continue to 'do more with less'; rather it should reduce or eliminate lower priority products and services."

One very expensive function is AskEric, which allows users to submit a search question electronically or through an 800 number. An individual at one of the ERIC clearinghouses then translates the question into an electronic search and provides relevant "hits" to the questioner. Note that AskEric does not provide answers to questions submitted by questioners, only ERIC abstracts. In 2004 going forward, it should be possible, with appropriate on-line help, for education users to conduct their own searches, or to seek personalized assistance at one of the nation's 11,000 public and university libraries. There is no other widely available electronic library that provides a personal search service and no reason to think that individuals interested in the published literature in education are less able to use an electronic search function than people interested in the published literature in psychology or agriculture. AskEric is expensive, unnecessary, and a relic of the paper age.

7. **Spotty coverage.** Although ERIC's core mission is to provide access to the literature in education, it does not provide comprehensive coverage of the published literature. As of mid-May of 2003, no entries for the *Journal of Child Language* had appeared in ERIC since 2001. No articles from the *Cambridge Journal of Education* had appeared since 2000. Only 350 journals are indexed in

1. **Lack of design uniformity.** Each of the 16 ERIC clearinghouses has its own web page design, its own standards for acquiring content, its own database structure, and its own outreach effort. As a result, the typical user is confronted with inexplicable variability in what can be found and how it can be found and where it can be found across the different clearinghouses. Usability tests conducted in 2003 documented user confusion about ERIC websites and functions.
2. **Focus on the gray literature.** Databases that serve other fields, such as PsycInfo in psychology or Medline in medicine or Agricola in agriculture, focus on the published literature. This assures some level of vetting and quality control over the content of the information database. In contrast, ERIC specializes in the gray, or non-published literature. For example, ERIC contractors actively solicit individuals who are giving poster presentations at professional meetings to submit their work for inclusion in ERIC. Meeting presentations are almost always preliminary versions of work, and most are never published because they do not meet the standards for peer-reviewed publications. Meeting presentations that are eventually published are nearly always revised substantially, as a result of peer review. The result of the current ERIC practice is that the ERIC database is filled with material and content that has met no quality standard, is preliminary, and may be substantially misleading. The community of education practitioners that uses ERIC is thus accessing information that would not be disseminated according to the standards of other fields. This contributes substantially to the confusion in education about what the evidence says.
3. **Long delays in bringing information on-line.** There is typically a delay of 6 to 9 months between information being published and becoming available in the ERIC system. As of mid-May of 2003 none of the Department of Education's 2003 publications that are available from EdPubs was available from ERIC. We have documented many instances in which two or more years pass between publication of important documents and their availability in ERIC. This is due to the individual clearinghouses continuing to engage in practices for acquiring, cataloging, and publishing information that were developed when ERIC was a paper system and distribution was by microfiche. Long delays in information availability do not serve ERIC users well.
4. **Reliance on abstracts and absence of full-text access.** The current ERIC provides article abstracts. Access to full text is limited, except through microfiche and paper document reproduction. Consequently, users very often rely only on the abstracts as the sole source of information on an article's content. ERIC abstracts are not written by the authors of the articles. Instead, they are written by clearinghouse staff who strive for brevity and uniformity in style. Most ERIC abstracts are 3 or 4 sentence annotations that fall far short of the information provided in the author's abstract that appears with the original publication. The result is that often ERIC abstracts substantially mislead in terms of the findings


their entirety. In comparison, the education databases of the H.W. Wilson Company, another reference provider, contain 478 education-specific journals, all of which are indexed in their entirety, including 92 journals that are not in ERIC (Rodbard, Shafer et al. 2001). Few serious scholars in education depend on ERIC as a sole source for journal coverage of topics in education because of the selective, spotty, and scant coverage.

8. **Misleading syntheses of information.** The clearinghouses try to consolidate education research information by reviewing the literature on subjects in their respective areas. The related products include brief (two-page) ERIC Digests and longer “major publications,” usually monographs of 100 pages or more. As a rule, the clearinghouses conduct uncritical literature reviews. They usually do not assess the quality of the materials reviewed and do not produce rigorous syntheses. The result is digests and reports that in many cases do not fulfill the statutory mandate to disseminate information that is scientifically valid. For example, a recent ERIC literature review, *Dropouts and Career and Technical Education*, simply summarizes anything ever written about vocational interventions, with little clarification of either the intervention or the quality of the research. The Digest concludes that there is “solid statistical evidence” that career and technical education reduces dropping out. That conclusion is not supported by a careful and critical analysis of published research. The What Works Clearinghouse, already established within the Institute of Education Sciences, will assume a major part of the responsibility for synthesizing and disseminating research information. We will be developing other dissemination mechanisms to provide short, user-friendly reports on new findings and issues in education.

ED will competitively award one or more new ERIC contracts to replace 19 contracts when they expire in 2003 and 2004. A fundamental goal for ERIC's future is to *increase* the availability and quality of research and information for educators, researchers, and the general public. Although your letter expresses the concern that the new ERIC will narrow the range and types of information available, in fact the new database will be: **Comprehensive** (all journal articles, rather than selected articles, will be included; access to a much longer list of journals will be provided as well as access to government, foundation, and contractor reports; full text access will be provided whenever possible); **Cost effective** (centralization of database building eliminates duplicative work allowing labor costs to be reduced; savings will provide funds to expand coverage, provide full text access, and introduce new technologies); **Efficient and user-friendly** (non-commercial materials will be free rather than being sold by an ERIC contractor; one ERIC website will replace many; the database will completely describe information materials and use one highly efficient search engine rather than four; instant electronic access will be provided to resources rather than waiting two days for purchase orders to be filled; new research and information will be added quickly, rather than 3-24 months later, after processing by separate contractors).

I assure you that the Department's intention is to provide a much stronger and more useful ERIC for the future. After over 37 years, it is time for an overhaul. I am pleased to have had this opportunity to respond to the issues you have raised. I have sent an identical response to the cosigners of your letter and would be happy to meet with you or your staff to discuss the contract competition for a new ERIC system.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Grover J. Whitehurst', written in a cursive style.

Grover J. Whitehurst