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EDUCATION'S LIBRARY

Actions Needed to Improve
Usefulness

Statement of
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SUMMARY OF TESTIMONY BY LINDA G. MORRA
ON ACTIONS NEEDED TO IMPROVE THE USEFULNESS
OF EDUCATION'S RESEARCH LIBRARY

The Department of Education's Research Library is the major federal education library. Library officials estimate that it contains 250,000 to 300,000 volumes, including both contemporary and historical collections. It has special collections, including rare books, some of which date back to the 15th century. Although the Library has never systematically inventoried or evaluated its entire collection, experts agreed that the historical collections are very valuable. The contemporary collection was seen as less comprehensive and therefore somewhat less useful than the historical collection.

GAO found that the library needs a collection development policy to make effective day-to-day decisions regarding acquisition and preservation. Absent this policy, the Library's contemporary collection has been largely influenced by the interests of individual Secretaries of Education. Also the Library has accepted a broad range of gifts of library materials without considering the needs of its users or whether it had sufficient resources to properly catalog and preserve the materials.

Other factors limited the Library's usefulness. A 1989 Department survey of its staff showed that although 63 percent of respondents needed library services in their work, only 42 percent had used the Library. Reasons cited for their limited use were that the library did not have needed materials and that it was inconveniently located. Following the survey the Department set up a satellite library in the Department's headquarters building to improve accessibility.

Also, many organizations GAO contacted said they were unaware of the Library or its collections. They said the Library is a potential source for information such as historical and legislative documents and for accessing education data bases. They thought the Library's collections and services should be better publicized and that dissemination of materials should be improved.

Finally, Library officials told us that about one-half of the Library's volumes had not been cataloged, and thus generally were not retrievable and useful to users. In addition, about 40,000 books in the historical and rare book collections are poorly maintained and preserved.

The Department is taking steps in line with GAO's recommendation. To define a collection development policy, the Department had to first determine the Library's scope of responsibilities and complete revision of its mission statement. The mission statement has recently been approved and work is continuing on the collection development policy.

Mr. Chairman

I am pleased to be here today to discuss GAO's findings concerning the Department of Education's Research Library. As you know, our review was mandated by the Library Services and Construction Act Amendments of 1990, Public Law 101-254, Section 9. We completed our work about a year ago and issued our report on the subject (Education's Library: Actions Needed to Improve its Usefulness) HRD-91-61) in April 1991.

The report addressed the (1) scholastic and historic value of the Library's collection, (2) effectiveness of services it provides to Education employees, and (3) need to expand public access to the Library. In addressing these specific issues it became clear that the Library lacked a collection development policy specifying (1) its primary and other users and (2) its materials' acquisition and preservation priorities and practices.

We recommended that the Secretary determine the Library's scope and responsibilities, and in line with that determination, assure timely completion of a mission statement and a collection development policy. Last week the Department approved a revised Library mission statement. Work on the collection development policy is continuing.

I will now provide some background on the Library and more detail on our findings.

BACKGROUND

Education's Research Library is the major federal education library. Library officials estimate that it contains 250,000 to 300,000 volumes, including both contemporary and historical collections. It has special collections, including rare books, some of which date back to the 15th century. The Library consists of the Library Section and the Education Reference Center Section, both of which report to the Director, Office of

Library Programs, in the Office for Educational Research and Improvement (OERI).

Our work focused on the Library Section, which maintains a major collection of books, periodicals and microforms and conducts routine library activities, such as acquisition, cataloging, circulation, interlibrary loans and reference services. We reviewed several existing studies of alternatives for improving public access to the Library. We interviewed representatives of 20 key education associations and library organizations as well as a researcher and librarians familiar with the Library's collections. We also reviewed a Department staff survey concerning staff use of the Library.

NEED FOR BETTER DEFINED

MISSION AND COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT POLICY

A mission statement and collection development policy, together, should form the basis for the Secretary of Education's decisions about the Library. However, at the time of our review the Library did not have a collection development policy and was revising its mission statement.

The Library needs to articulate a collection development policy. According to the American Library Association and other library experts, a collection development policy is needed to make effective day-to-day decisions regarding acquisition and preservation of materials. Such a policy would help assure that the library systematically takes into account the needs of its users and the availability of resources for cataloging and preservation services. Absent this guidance, the Library's contemporary collection has been largely influenced by the interests of individual Secretaries of Education. Also, the Library has accepted a broad range of gifts of library materials without considering their usefulness to library users or whether

the library had sufficient resources to store and catalog the materials.

A collection development policy should specify the needs and services to be provided for each user group designated in the Library's mission statement. Therefore, a clear mission statement is needed. At the time of our review an OERI Library Advisory Committee was revising the mission statement to better target library services and was also drafting a collection development policy.

As I noted earlier, the Department has approved a revised mission statement and work is continuing on the collection development policy. The Department also plans to review the Library's role in a larger context. In July 1991, the Secretary reported to GAO that various components within the Department, including the Library, could serve as the foundation for a national information network. He indicated that OERI was forming a group to assess educators' needs and determine how the various components could be structured to meet those needs. More recently, Department officials informed us that management changes within OERI had delayed the group's formation but the Department intends to convene the group once a Director for Library Programs is appointed.

SCHOLASTIC AND HISTORIC VALUE OF THE COLLECTIONS

Although the Library has never systematically inventoried or evaluated its entire collection, experts agree that the historical collections are very valuable. They said that the Library provides information unavailable even in other libraries with strong education collections. For example, they said the Library contains unique materials on the nation's 19th century educational system, including the education of the American Indian. They also described the selection of early American journals and materials on the history of American colleges as

excellent and ranked the textbook collection as one of the three or four best in the country.

USE BY DEPARTMENT STAFF

Although the Library's collection is seen as having scholastic and historical value, a 1989 Department staff survey showed that the Library is underused. Although 63 percent of the respondents reported needing library services in their work, only 42 percent had ever used the Library. Employees said that the Library's inconvenient location -- away from the Department's headquarters -- was one major reason for the relatively low use. In response to these concerns the Department set up a satellite library in the Department's headquarters building in April 1990.

Employees also said their use of the Library was limited because it lacked needed materials; expert opinions echoed this concern. Department officials said that the contemporary collection, rather than the historical one, was of most use to Department staff. However, experts saw the Library's contemporary collections as less comprehensive than the historical collection and therefore less attractive to researchers. The contemporary collection is less comprehensive because of a decline in acquisition of material during the mid-1950s and the mid-1980s, when the Library experienced several organizational and geographic changes.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS SEE NEED TO IMPROVE PUBLIC ACCESS TO LIBRARY

Many potential library users were unaware of the Library's collections and services. Also, problems in collection cataloging and maintenance reduce the usefulness of the Library to those who do use it.

Education researchers and others outside the federal government who gather education information were generally unaware of the Library's various collections. Eleven of the 20 organizations we surveyed said that their staffs rarely or never use the Library. Of the 11, 7 said their staffs were unaware of the Library or its collections.

Fifteen of the 20 organizations we surveyed as well as library experts we contacted said the Library needed to increase public access. Several organizations pointed to difficulties staffs have in obtaining needed information, such as historical and legislative documents and accessing education data bases. The Library is a potential source for such information and expanding its public accessibility would likely improve users' abilities to obtain needed data. They thought access could be improved by better publicizing the Library's collections and services and improving dissemination of materials. For example, they suggested publishing bibliographies of Library materials and summaries of the research available through the Library.

Finally, Library officials told us that about one-half of the Library's volumes are not cataloged, and thus generally are not retrievable and useful to users. The uncataloged volumes include books in the historical and textbook collections as well as Education publications and other materials developed under federally funded grants. In addition, about 40,000 books in the historical and rare book collections are poorly maintained and preserved.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, we found that the Library is a potentially valuable source of information for educational researchers, policy makers, and others. However, lack of clear policies for collection development and weaknesses in collection cataloging and preservation limit its usefulness. The Department is taking steps in line with our recommendation. It has

established the Library's mission and is working to define a collection development policy. Once that is done the Secretary should make sure that resources budgeted are consistent with the revised mission and policy.

This concludes my testimony Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to answer questions.