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Library Services Improvement Act (1989): Report 17

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THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RESEARCH LIBRARY

Retain the Inherently Governmental Functions

The House, on September 12, passed HR 2742 reauthorizing the Library Services and Construction Act. Section 9 of the bill prohibits a planned contracting out of the Department of Education Library for two years and requires a General Accounting Office study of the library. A comparable section is not part of the Senate bill, S. 1291, and will be a conference item.

Established more than 100 years ago, the Research Library has remained an integral part of the Department's operation, serving both departmental staff as well as the education research community. The Library maintains one of the largest and most comprehensive collections on education in the United States, second only to Columbia Teachers' College Library. Included in its collections are the complete archives of the Department of Education and thousands of rare books, textbooks, and other materials, some dating back to the 15th century. It is the House intent that the Library will be fully assessed before any action to contract out its services is taken.

Rationale for retention of governmental functions

°The determination of "inherently governmental functions" is required by Office of Management and Budget Circular A-76, "Performance of Commercial Activities," and should have been included in the A-76 management study. It was not.

°The "inherently governmental functions" which give the Library direction and constitute policy are:

Library Director: sets priorities, conducts outreach, community relations, and represents the government.

Reference and Research: supplies information requested by library users, including confidential policy information for senior departmental personnel, and assists users in locating needed information, using all available reference sources.

Collection Development: determines and coordinates selection policy, assesses needs of users and potential users, conducts collection use studies, evaluates collection, identifies needs and direction, selects materials, plans for resource sharing, manages the collection.

Systems Management: determines direction of technological applications, allocates resources.

°For about 15 years, the Library contracted with the private sector for the performance of several functions, e.g., circulation, technical services, interlibrary loan, serials control, etc. These functions are "operational" and under A-76 definitions are considered "commercial". Currently, there is no contract.

- °According to a recent Department of Defense investigation report by the House Appropriations Committee, "The implementation of A-76 in DOD has not resulted in any cost savings, efficiencies or economies, as the expenditures required to conduct cost studies have exceeded claimed savings." (Federal Computer Week, March 6, 1989)
- °In designating units whose work may be contracted out, agencies often spend millions of dollars to decide if money could be saved. When these costs are not included in A-76 projections, the result is inflated savings estimates. The Department of Education has had recent experiences with this issue. An A-76 study of questionable worth was completed on the Library at a cost of \$80,000 for the contractor and thousands of dollars worth of in-house time and money.
- °The Library is well-known for the quality of its professional staff who have sound knowledge of the collection and education issues, and are central to the Department of Education's corporate memory. If the Department proceeds with the contracting out of the Library, it will not be saving money, rather, it "will be buying amnesia," as stated by David Allison, Society for History in the Federal Government.

Rationale for A GAO Study

- °The Department of Education Research Library is the federal government's most comprehensive and valuable collection in the field of current and historical education information. It is the sole repository of valuable 19th and 20th century materials in the field of education and the social sciences. Several special collections, e.g., Rare Books, Historical Collection, Early American Textbooks, and periodicals are unique and historically significant and should be considered national treasures. The Library of Congress, the National Library of Medicine and other departmental libraries have traditionally made a special effort to preserve this type of material.
- °Since the early 1970s, an authoritative evaluation of the Library's collections by a recognized expert has been discussed and recommended repeatedly, but has never materialized. Several important collections have been donated to the library. Some have been cataloged and are retrievable; others remain in boxes. Earlier management studies of the Library and the recently completed A-76 study have been of little value because of the lack of a collection analysis of the Library's historical and current resources.