

From: kdlarsen1948@gmail.com <kdlarsen1948@gmail.com>

Sent: Wednesday, October 4, 2023 5:40 AM

To: Samuelson, Jennifer <Jennifer.Samuelson@vermont.gov>

Cc: Jepson, Lyle <Lyle.Jepson@vermont.gov>

Subject: Ed. Secretary Search

Dave & Kathy Larsen
PO Box 172
Wilmington, VT 05363
kdlarsen1948@gmail.com
(802) 464-2263

October 4, 2023

Jennifer Samuelson, Chair
Vermont State Board of Education
Manchester Center, VT 05255

Dear Ms. Samuelson:

I read with interest about the search for a new secretary of education, and I have a few thoughts I'd like to share with you and those involved in the search. As a matter of introduction, I have listed my experience in and with education in Vermont.

- Public school teacher in Wilmington (VT) Middle/High School (1972-2005)
- State representative, 1987-1997 (eight years on the House education committee including four years as vice-chair and two years as chair; two years on the House appropriations committee managing the education budget)
- UVM Board of Trustees, 2001-2007
- State Board of Education, 1999-2003 (one year as vice-chair and two years as chair)
- Seven months as interim commissioner of education, 2003
- Consultant with the VT Department of Education, 2006-2012
- VSAC Board of Directors, 2004-present.

At the risk of appearing boastful by listing the above, I wanted to at least provide a context for my comments that follow.

• **Value local talent.** As you begin your search, there will be those who will advocate for a national search. While nationally known applicants may look good on paper, they are often less likely than a comparable in-state candidate to be a suitable fit for Vermont. Vermont candidates are more likely to understand, appreciate, and respect Vermont's education culture and culture overall. It's important to note that since 1988, all of Vermont's education commissioners and secretaries have had Vermont roots. And before 1988, I believe most commissioners had a Vermont connection before being selected to serve in that capacity. All of these individuals capably served Vermont.

• **The secretary must have credibility with local educators.** Vermont's secretary of education must be able to effectively relate to those who are dealing directly with students. It is the secretary who serves as the conduit between upper level policymakers (the administration, state board, and general

assembly) who create policies and laws, and those who are charged with implementing those policies and laws, namely teachers, principals, and superintendents. If a secretary is to inspire and motivate, they must have credibility and relatability with local educators. Without it, these policies and laws, no matter how well-intentioned, will be extremely difficult to effectively implement.

- **The secretary must have credibility with the public.** The rhetoric that accompanies lofty goals is far too often lofty in and of itself. Nothing alienates the public more and more quickly than someone with a title who insists on communicating by using education jargon and haughty rhetoric. In order to be a successful statewide leader, the secretary must be able to present complex concepts and goals with language and affect that will attract both the interest and the support of the general public.

- **The secretary must push back against mission creep.** Policy makers, including lawmakers, continue to task the agency of education with more and more responsibilities. The secretary must understand the capacity of the agency and fight to dispel the dubious notion that more can be accomplished “with less” or by “working smarter.” Certainly, efficiency in the agency is a reasonable expectation. However, the secretary must have the resolve to insist that new responsibilities assigned to the agency, especially by the legislature, be accompanied either by commensurate funding to pay for those added responsibilities or by removing outdated current responsibilities - or both.

- **The secretary must possess the skills to build partnerships.** Many if not most of the expectations included in the posting’s job description (community revitalization, educational equality, increasing test scores, assuring meaningful post-secondary educational engagement, and supporting students from across the educational spectrum) are most certainly beyond the exclusive purview of the secretary. Achieving any of these goals will require hiring a secretary who understands the importance of working collaboratively with the general assembly and other groups and, more importantly, has the skills to do so.

- **The secretary must be a true champion of public education.** Public education in Vermont is at risk of “suffering death by a thousand cuts.” Our public schools continue to be responsible for solving problems they did not create. Whether it’s underfunding, having to assume responsibility for providing increasingly more health and human services to their students in response to society’s ills, statutory or policy interpretations that advantage independent schools, the extreme and debilitating politicization of public education, or any number of other factors, Vermont’s public schools need and deserve a committed and unequivocal champion. The secretary must be that champion.

- **A final note.** While I was chairing the SBE, I led the search for a new commissioner in 2001. I know how daunting this task can be. I offer my thoughts as only one person’s perspective on the role of the secretary and hope that in some small way they might be helpful. Thank you for considering them.

I wish you and your colleagues the best as your search continues.

Sincerely,

Dave Larsen

cc: Gov. Phil Scott
Lyle Jepson