

Biographical Sketch of Jennifer Deck Samuelson, Esq.  
Vice-Chair, Vermont State Board of Education

I grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, the youngest of four children, and I have had the privilege of being raised in a family that placed a high premium on education. Given my parents' upbringing, however, this was not a foregone conclusion. Both of my mother's parents were first-generation Americans. Neither graduated from high school, and my mom was the first in her extended family to attend college. Even on my dad's side, my uncle did not attend college and few of my cousins did, either. By the time I was born, my dad was a Professor of Chemistry at the University of Louisville, while my mom brought cultural enrichment programs into the Jefferson County Public schools and testified before the Kentucky State Legislature as to the need for a Gifted & Talented Program. I learned by osmosis a lot of what my older siblings were studying in school, and I graduated from high school in three years. I attended college in Los Angeles and spent six months in France during my junior year; both of these experiences taught me the importance, not just of academic learning, but also of appreciating other people's cultural backgrounds and personal experiences.

I would describe myself as a voracious learner, and it is this trait that propelled me to become a lawyer: over the course of my professional career, I have learned about many different aspects of the law, and I love having the tools to teach both myself and others. I believe in the power of education and my law practice focuses on working with my clients to identify and implement customized solutions to their unique issues. As a result, my practice tends to be less confrontational and more collaborative, and I enjoy finding creative solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

On a personal level, my husband and I are the proud parents of three daughters who range in age from 15 to 20. Between the three of them, I have a child with a learning disability, a child who skipped a grade, a shy child, an extrovert, a "theater kid", and a blooming athlete. My husband and I have worked hard to meet each child where she is, to help her to overcome her challenges, and to celebrate her successes. At the same time, I try to be transparent with my children and to serve as a positive role model. Honestly, it had never occurred to me to add another layer to my life — that of a public servant — until the 2016 presidential elections. I was dismayed by the political polarization that gripped our country and, rather than helplessly complaining about it, I realized that I should lend my efforts to achieve the change that I wanted. It was at that point that I decided to run for a position on the Winhall School Board, and I was sworn in in March 2017.

Serving on the Winhall School Board seemed like a natural fit for me. It was a small but important step that reflected my belief in the power of education to promote equity and equality between students of diverse backgrounds. This seems critical, now more than ever, as our nation confronts centuries of systemic inequality and addresses the threats posed by climate change. Our future leaders need a solid understanding of science and history on the one hand and the ability to engage in creative problem-solving and collaboration on the other.

It was my love of learning, coupled with the desire to increase my impact, that led me to the State Board of Education. As I consider my role on the Board, my only agenda is to serve to the best of my ability in whatever way is most helpful to the Governor, the Legislature, the Agency of Education, and my fellow Board members. Since I was appointed last August, I have joined the Non-Act 173 Rule 2220 Series Revisions Subcommittee to update and improve the rules governing independent schools. I was also asked to oversee the work of the Rule 2220 Series Rate-Setting Working Group to help them resolve their differences and achieve consensus on their proposed new Rule 2232. I have recently been named the point person who will work directly with the hearing officer whom we have retained to oversee a petition for a declaratory ruling filed by a therapeutic independent school, and I have also agreed to shepherd the entire Rule 2220 Series through their adoption in accordance with the Vermont Administrative Procedures Act. At every step, my goal is to use my current skills — and to acquire new ones — to further the Board's mission of defining and implementing a strategic vision for education in Vermont. It is an honor to serve in this capacity.