



PROFILE: IOWA SENATE PRESIDENT AMY SINCLAIR

New presiding officer of the Senate reflects on attributes of effective leadership, and looks ahead to a year focused on school choice and property taxes

by Derek Cantù (dcantu@csg.org)

When she moved several years ago from Missouri to Iowa, Amy Sinclair discovered right away something unique about her adopted home state.

"Politics is a very, very participatory sport in Iowa, if you will," Sinclair says.

"If you haven't met a president or a presidential candidate, it's because you've been actively avoiding them."

The reason: As the longtime home of the country's first-in-the-nation presidential primary caucuses, Iowa has been a place where presidential candidacies have been known to end or ascend.

Sinclair attended her first-ever caucus in 2004, and soon after, a long political career of her own began to take off.

A local Republican party leader approached her about running for office, though the prospects of beating a three-time incumbent on the county Board of Supervisors didn't sound very promising.

"He said, 'You know you'll lose, but nobody should be on the ballot unopposed,'" she recalls.

But to most everyone's surprise, including herself, Sinclair won the election. She has held public office of some kind ever since.

"I absolutely fell in love with the process of self-governance," she says. "We get to come together through government to provide our roads, our hospitals, our fire departments, our police protection.

"All of those are things that we don't pay for on our own, we pay for together."

Sinclair served two terms as a county supervisor while also working as an educator in her home community, where she taught parenting courses and GED and adult basic education classes.

Ahead of the 2012 elections, Sinclair was again asked by the same local party leader to run for office, this time a seat in the state Senate.

Sinclair is now approaching her 10th anniversary in the Legislature, a tenure marked in part by leadership on education policy (as chair of the Senate Education Committee) and within the Republican Senate caucus.

Regionwide, too, Sinclair is co-chair of the steering committee of Midwestern legislators that oversees the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development, a signature program of The Council of State Governments' Midwestern Legislative Conference. (She is a 2016 BILLD graduate.)

And for the year ahead, Sinclair looks forward to taking on a new challenge — presiding officer of the state's upper



BIO-SKETCH: IOWA SEN. AMY SINCLAIR

- ✓ elected Senate president in November 2022; also has served as majority whip and Senate Education Committee chair
- ✓ first elected to the Legislature in 2012
- ✓ served two terms on Iowa's Wayne County Board of Supervisors
- ✓ has worked as an adult education instructor through her local school district and community college
- ✓ is a 2016 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD) and serves as co-chair of the Midwestern Legislative Conference BILLD Steering Committee

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legislative chamber. She recently was elected Senate president by legislative colleagues in her caucus.

In an interview with CSG Midwest, Sinclair discussed this new role, her views on leadership, and her legislative priorities for 2023. Here are excerpts.

Q How has your previous experience as majority whip prepared you for your new role as Senate president?

A In my role as whip, I didn't view that as browbeating my colleagues into doing what the leadership thought that they ought to do. I viewed that as a position where I needed to make sure that whatever we were doing, all of my colleagues could be on board. It was more consensus building than arm twisting. That consensus building, that approach that I took to being whip, is an approach that I can take into serving as president.

Q What do you view as the essential elements of an effective leader?

A Without question, listening, which goes back to that whole idea of consensus building — making sure the things that we're doing make sense for everyone.

But, also, being able to make a tough decision when you can't find a consensus. Somebody ultimately has to take the heat on whatever decisions are made. And I think being willing to stand in that position that takes the heat, so that your team doesn't have to, is the mark of a good leader.

Q What are your top policy priorities for the year ahead?

A We're going to work on property tax reform. When I leave my house and talk to my constituents, the first thing they bring up is property taxes. When you're throwing increased property values — which cause increased taxes — in with out-of-control inflation, it's suddenly really become a forefront issue for people to have some more transparency and predictability in their property tax bills.

Number two, from a policy standpoint, I will be focusing on an issue that shouldn't surprise anybody because it's something that I've worked on the entire time I've been in the Legislature. It's the notion that parents should have a greater degree of control over where and how their kids are educated.

We want to strengthen our public school system, but also give parents a choice in educational alternatives.

Q There was an unsuccessful effort this past year to pass a private-school scholarship bill (SF 2369), a major priority of Gov. Kim Reynolds. Will there be enough support this time around?

A There are a lot of new House members, and the bulk of those new House members are all supportive of the governor's proposal that parents be given the driver's seat in their kids' education — that scholarships for low- and moderate-income kids, or for kids with special needs, be made available to parents. I think there's support for it.

Q One goal for you and other education leaders in Iowa

has been to have 70 percent of the state's workforce possess either a college degree or professional license by the year 2025. How is the state progressing on that goal?

A One of the biggest steps we've taken is actually ramping up our apprenticeship programs, where people are earning while they're learning. I would like to believe we now have one of the strongest apprenticeship programs in the nation.

At our high school level, we have a really strong Jobs for America's Graduates. Our program has expanded leaps and bounds over the last several years because of the results. Some of our most at-risk kids not only graduate from high school, but also seek out those degrees and certificates at levels they would not have attained otherwise. ...

The third thing that we do really well is our dual enrollment programs, so that kids who are in high school can go ahead and start on a [postsecondary] degree while they're still in high school. Just speaking from a personal level, two of my children were able to complete associate's degrees while in high school and gain dual credit for that work. I have a third son in high school right now, and he'll have 12 college credit hours by the end of his sophomore year.

Finally, we have last-dollar scholarships that allow people to achieve degrees or certificates in some very specific areas of study that are necessary for Iowa's economy. We'll come in through that last-dollar scholarship program and make sure folks leave a community college with zero debt and a certificate to walk into a high-demand job.