

PROFILE: INDIANA SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE TODD HUSTON



Protect the institution, prioritize policy over politics: Top leader uses those principles in guiding the chamber and a supermajority legislative caucus

by Derek Cantù (dcantu@cs.org)

Now three years into the job, Speaker Todd Huston still keeps in mind two pieces of advice that his predecessor gave him as the two planned for a transition in leadership at the Indiana House.

Number one: “Your first job as speaker of the House is to protect the institution.”

“You have the responsibility to make sure that the institution is sound and respected,” Huston says about what he learned from Speaker Brian Bosma, who held the position longer than any other person in state history.

Number two: “Good policy makes for good politics.”

“Do the right thing and the politics will shake itself out,” Huston says, “and I just try to remind myself of that all the time.”

You don’t always “get it right” as a legislator or leader, he adds, but adhering to those two principles helps keep your state, the legislature and your caucus going in the right direction.

It also allows Huston to stay true to what led him to seek state elective office in the first place — “to do things that have an impact for my district and for the state for years and decades to come.”

He joined the House in 2012, and by that time, Huston already had made a mark as a leader on education policy, serving on his local school board and, at the behest of then-Gov. Mitch Daniels, on the State Board of Education and Indiana Education Roundtable.

The chance to become speaker arose in late 2019, and it also came with a unique learning opportunity.

Bosma had announced he would retire at the end of the 2020 session, and House Republicans unanimously chose Huston as “speaker elect.” It was the first time the caucus had ever created such a position, and allowed Huston to learn directly under Bosma’s tutelage.

That session of transition now “seems like a lifetime ago,” says Huston, but it’s one he’ll always be thankful for.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Huston reflected on his views of legislative leadership and effectiveness, recent new laws in Indiana on education policy and more. Here are excerpts.

Q You’ve talked about what you learned from your predecessor. What other lessons have you taken away from your many years in public service?

A You have to work with people. You have to work to get the number of votes you need. You can have a great idea, but if you can’t get people



BIO-SKETCH: INDIANA SPEAKER TODD HUSTON

- ✓ became speaker in 2020; first elected to the Indiana House in 2012
- ✓ previously served on his local school board and as a member of the Indiana State Board of Education and the Indiana Education Roundtable
- ✓ was a senior vice president at The College Board
- ✓ has a bachelor’s degree in political science from Indiana University
- ✓ lives in Fishers, Ind.; he and his wife, Denise, have two adult children
- ✓ is a 2016 graduate of CSG Midwest’s BILLD leadership program

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to support that idea, it’s not going to go anywhere. ... I also tell new members, “You’re going to learn a lot. A lot of it’s going to be through experience. And the only thing that compensates for that lack of experience is just hard work.”

Q How do you seek consensus or support within your own caucus, as well as among legislative leaders from both parties and the entire House?

A That all begins with building relationships within our caucus and within the body. People need to know that you’re going to listen to them and you’re going to respect them. It doesn’t mean you’re always going to agree with them. ...

The other thing is you’ve got to know your topic. You can’t “cheat” by thinking that since you’re in a position of leadership, people are just going to follow blindly. Whether you’re a bill author or speaker of the House, they want to follow you because they think you know the topic, and you know that it’s the right thing for their district and our state. That’s critical.

I’ve always had a very open and honest relationship with all our members, I love the leadership of the House Democrats; they’re terrific people. And the same thing with the leadership in both Senate caucuses.

Q You’ve long been a leader on education policy, and this session, eligibility for Indiana’s school voucher

program was expanded — now for families with incomes up to 400 percent of the federal poverty rate. Why did you and your House colleagues strongly advocate for this, even as some members of your own party in the Senate had pushed back against the proposal?

A Our caucus has always just believed that the money should follow the child. The students and the families should determine the best place for that child to go to school. ... We fund students, not systems, in the state of Indiana. ... I remind people that through all the school-choice expansions we’ve had in Indiana over the last decade, the Senate has always been a partner in that, and they were again this year.

Q Indiana has a long history of offering school vouchers/choice, but private-school attendance has been dropping. Do you believe the expansion could change this trend?

A I don’t know if it will or it won’t. I guess what I would say is I’m not really worried about that trend; I’m just worried about getting kids in the schools that best fits their needs.

The private schools will have to compete for kids and make a value proposition to parents that that’s the best place for their kid to go to school. And if the schools do it, good for them. If they don’t, that’s their problem.

For us, we just felt like this is about money following students to the schools

that best fit their needs, no matter whether that is a traditional public school, a charter school or a private school.

Q You also have been heavily involved with the legislature’s expanded investment in the Regional Economic Acceleration & Development Initiative, or READI. Can you describe the overall objectives of this program?

A I’ll take one step back and just note that it’s one of the key areas of my legislative career where I was just wrong initially. In 2015, the Regional Cities Initiative was put into place, and I was not a super big supporter of that and just wasn’t sure that the bang was worth the dollars. I then traveled the state and went to the areas that received [initiative funding] and heard and saw the impact that it had. It’s about building quality of life, connecting communities together, building partnerships. I realized, “Hey, I don’t think I was right in my opinion on that program.” ...

We then had an opportunity in 2021 to make an investment in READI, which shares those same goals. It’s about quality of place, it’s about creating connections between communities — things that will have long-term impacts that maybe a community or a region couldn’t have done without a little state assistance.

We were able to fund \$500 million in each of the last two budgets. And I continue to hear nothing but positive things [about] the impacts. ... The best part is it’s created a tremendous amount of cooperation and really positive activity to bring people together to solve community and regional issues.