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Huston 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, the state for years and decades to come. That session of transition now “seems like a lifetime ago,” says Huston, and it’s one he’ll always be thankful for.

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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 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 is 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 I love 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 support this, even as 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 fit 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.