

PROFILE: IOWA HOUSE MINORITY LEADER JENNIFER KONFRST



History-making lawmaker discusses political leadership and communication, including what she views as an under-utilized legislative tool — the floor speech

by Derek Cantù (dcantu@csq.org)

Jennifer Konfrst likes to say she grew up around the Iowa Capitol. As a girl, she would often tag along with her father, a statehouse reporter for more than 30 years with the Associated Press.

"I used to sell Girl Scout cookies on the floor of the Iowa House of Representatives," she recalls.

Konfrst also did a lot of listening and learning. One of the most lasting memories: the day she oversaw a heated exchange between the House speaker and a Republican lawmaker. The two were screaming at each other, seemingly the worst of enemies.

"After the argument, they were laughing and patting each other on the back," says Konfrst, who was 10 at the time. "I asked my dad, 'How can they be so mad at each other and still be friends?'"

"And he said, 'It's the only way it works.'"

It turned out to be an important lesson for someone who went from young observer of the Legislature to, many years later, one of its top leaders.

Konfrst points to her involvement in her children's schools, as a longtime parent volunteer and PTA president, as a catalyst for bringing her back to the Capitol.

"I started to think about [running for the] school board and realized that they don't get to pick how much money they have," she says. "So I decided to run for the Legislature instead."

Once in office, she quickly took on leadership roles and, in 2021, became the first woman to lead Iowa's House Democratic Caucus.

In her "day job," Konfrst is an associate professor of public relations at Drake University, and while on sabbatical during the 2022-'23 school year, she embarked on a research project that brought together two of her longtime interests: the legislative process and communications strategy.

Specifically, Konfrst wanted to learn how floor speeches are used as a communications tool by legislators and party leaders. To find answers, she surveyed and interviewed legislative leaders from across the country.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Konfrst discussed that project and its findings, as well as her overall views on legislative communication and leadership. Here are excerpts, with questions and answers lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Q Why did you decide to study floor speeches in



BIO-SKETCH: IOWA REP. JENNIFER KONFRST

- ✓ has served as Iowa House minority leader since 2021; first elected to the Iowa House in 2018
- ✓ is an associate professor at Drake University's School of Journalism and Mass Communication; previously led communications strategy and development for Iowa Public Television
- ✓ earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Drake University
- ✓ resides in Windsor Heights (in the Des Moines area) with her husband, Lee; they have two children: Ellie and James

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legislatures, and what did you discover from your surveys and interviews with leaders?

A I believe that floor speeches are some of the most important things that we do as legislators from a communications standpoint. It's when the media are listening, when our colleagues are listening, and when the public is listening.

I asked legislative leaders of majority and minority parties from all states: "How do you decide who speaks on the floor?" "How do you decide what your floor strategy will be and who writes these remarks?"

What I found was there really isn't a strategy that is universal.

There are no trends in minority versus majority. There are really no trends even in large states and small states. What I found was that really members are driving whether or not they speak on the floor. It's almost like a crapshoot. It's just, "Who wants to speak on this bill? Great, go for it."

And I see that, personally, as a wasted opportunity. We're the only ones who get to talk on the floor. Everybody else, pundits [and] staff, can talk everywhere else. But this is our place to speak, and I think that we should be leveraging it more to explain our votes — or sometimes to not speak, which sends a message as well.

Q How can floor speeches be utilized, and can they still change minds in today's highly partisan legislative environment?

A I think they can be used more strategically. Leaders and members could work more collaboratively to determine floor-debate messaging to make sure it's as effective as possible. It brings message

cohesion; it brings more discipline to your messaging. ...

Most of the time in today's environment, the vote is decided before you come to the floor. Whether or not that's the way it should be, it is the way it is. I don't believe that right now these speeches are incredibly persuasive to our colleagues across the aisle. Therefore, I believe that our audience really is the media and the public watching. ...

However, I do believe that if we have very persuasive arguments that are based in logic and reason and fact, and that we use good arguments on the floor, there could be and have been a few people who might switch a vote.

Q Have you seen examples of this in Iowa?

A There was a representative from the other party [when] we were speaking on a gender-affirming-care ban. It was a very passionate, emotional debate.

One of the members of the Democratic caucus told the story of his daughter who had received gender-affirming care and said, "If anybody wants to talk to me about my daughter's experience, please do." In the course of that debate, that member [from the Republican side] went over because of the invitation on the floor, spoke to our member and changed his vote. Was it the floor speech itself, or was it the opening of the door to have the conversation? I won't know, but it was sparked by a floor speech.

Q Your caucus made Iowa history in 2022 by electing an all-women leadership team. What new perspectives do you think this team has brought?

A It wasn't intentional. I didn't go around recruiting women to run. It's just that those were the leaders who stood up and raised their hand. ... When I noticed it was all women running, I got a little excited because I thought, "Well, this is organic" ...

We bring very diverse interests to the table. We have educators, we have a minister, we have a former political professional who also worked at Planned Parenthood. We come from safe seats, flipped seats, purple seats.

Certainly, the "mom ethos" is part of the women-leadership era. We lead in a [way that is] more, "How might we bring these two people together to get something done?" We lead that way based on our experiences. I don't say it's because we were born with two X chromosomes. I believe it's because as women in this society, we were raised to be rewarded for finding consensus.

Q How would you describe your personal leadership style?

A I lead a group of independently elected officials who don't work for me. So it's really about leading, not bossing around, not forcing ideas. I work hard to find the balance, and I try to be very intentional about it. A balance between caucus consensus, leading with the priorities that I think are important to the caucus, and then trying to build our reputation over on the campaign side. ...

When I'm talking with [caucus staff], it's about "How can I build your career here?" Because I really feel that part of my responsibility as a leader is to build a bench of excellent, ethical, strong, talented staff in the state.