PROFILE: MINNESOTA SENATE ASSISTANT MAJORITY LEADER MARY KUNESH

Years in the classroom inform her work as a legislator and leader on school policy

by Tim Anderson *(tanderson@csg.org)*

For many years, the closest Mary Kunesh came to involvement in state policy was being asked to implement it.

A longtime teacher and library media specialist, she and her classroom colleagues were on the receiving end of many new education laws that came from the state Capitol — some good, she says, some not.

"The legislation often seemed to have good intention," Kunesh says, "but was not necessarily well-thought-out or not truly understanding what the real issues are. Or how it may be creating additional burdens."

One of her overarching goals since joining the Legislature: bring the voice of educators to discussions in Saint Paul over school finance and policy.

But that's not what led her to run for office in the first place. Instead, the breakthrough came from a conversation with her eldest daughter, who was managing a gubernatorial campaign and enlisted her mom to help.

Kunesh agreed, and soon began knocking on doors and traveling to Greater Minnesota as a campaign volunteer.

"It opened my understanding of what it is to be a person in politics, to run, and to know all the different issues we are all dealing with," Kunesh says.

When the opportunity came to run for office herself, thanks to a House seat that opened up in 2016, she took it. Kunesh won that election and has been a member of the Minnesota Legislature ever since, first in the House and now in the Senate. Her current leadership roles include serving as chair of the Senate Education Finance Committee, as assistant majority leader, and as chair of the National Council of American Indian Legislators.

Kunesh also is 2026 chair of The Council of State Governments' Midwestern Legislative Conference (see sidebar article below). Here are excerpts from a recent interview with CSG Midwest.

BIO-SKETCH: MINNESOTA SEN. MARY KUNESH

✓ serves as Senate assistant majority leader and Education Finance Committee chair; first elected to Legislature in 2016

✓ worked 25 years in public education as a teacher and library media specialist

✓ is first Indigenous woman to serve in Senate and a founding member of the Native American and People of Color & Indigenous caucuses

✓ is 2026 chair of The Council of State Governments' Midwestern Legislative Conference and a 2021 graduate of its BILLD leadership program

✓ is proud mother and grandmother who comes from a family of 13 children; resides in the city of New Brighton in Twin Cities area

Q You've gone from teaching to serving as a leader on state education policy. How has that past experience influenced your legislative work?

A One constant is bringing real-life experience to it. My partner on a lot of this, Sen. Steve Cwodzinski [chair of the Education Policy Committee], also is a teacher. So we always look at new legislation and whether it's truly going to work in the classroom. The other part is this: Are these funds going to hit the classroom, or are they just going to stay at the administrative level? That is a really important consideration for me.

Q Has the Legislature made progress in that area?

A I'm really proud of what we've done in terms of how we streamlined the funding of education. We did that with a real intention: Get rid of some of the extra things we're doing that are nice, but don't have a direct return for classrooms and teachers.

There are a lot of local organizations doing really, really good work in the community for our kids. But my focus is on getting dollars into the classroom and to the teachers. And this past year, we did that. So now we can see what we're really working with and how to continue to direct those dollars.

Q You also have focused on policies for Minnesota's Native American communities. What have been some recent advances in that area?

A I myself am of Native American descent, the first Native woman to have served in the Senate. One of the things I'm most proud of is the creation of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women's Task Force and, following that, a permanent office to continue the work of the task force. We've also created a specialty license plate to find a permanent revenue source for the office. It's been hugely successful.

Another thing is that in Minnesota, we created our own version of the Indian Child Welfare Act. What that did was fortify protections in our state for children and families, because there was the threat of the [federal] ICWA going away.

Q You served with former House Speaker Melissa Hortman, who was assassinated in June 2025 in a shooting that also took the life of her husband, Mark. What are your remembrances of her, especially enduring lessons on leadership and public service?

A Melissa Hortman was my House leader, and she would say: "I'm not here to devastate anybody. I'm not here to embarrass anybody. I'm not here to break anybody. So let's find a win-win here. What is it you want? Here is what I want. How can we work together so that everybody comes out a winner?"

And that's what I think good leaders do. It allows you to find ways for communities all over Minnesota to thrive, and that has a ripple effect.

Q To build on her legacy, how do you get to those win-win outcomes?

A I am always really clear with legislators on both sides. I am open to working with you; bring me your good ideas.

But it does take a lot of relationship building — a lot of understanding of not only the issue, but of the other legislators and the communities they come from.

That is something I've had to learn, where I have carried legislation in the past not having a full understanding of the impacts in a [legislative] district and why it might be unpopular. So I had to pull back a little bit. Get into that community, listen and understand what is being said.

KUNESH: A 'JOYOUS' MINNESOTA TRADITION WILL BE PART OF TOP MEETING FOR MIDWEST'S LEGISLATORS THIS SUMMER

The premier meeting for state and provincial legislators from the Midwest will be held in the Twin Cities this summer, and it's no coincidence that a beloved Minnesota event will be happening at the same time. "If there's one thing that brings us all together as a state," Minnesota Sen. Mary Kunesh says, "it's our State Fair."

She is making sure participating legislators and their guests from across the region have the chance to experience it for themselves. The 2026 Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting will be held Aug. 30-Sept. 2 in Saint Paul; among the many activities will be a special event at the largest state fair in the country.

"It is such a joyous event," Kunesh, 2026 MLC chair, says of what is known as "The Great Minnesota Get-Together" and for, among other traditions, its Kidway and Cattle Barn, 58 different "foods on a stick," hundreds of free entertainment shows, and livestock competitions.

"But we're also excited to show everyone our beautiful Capitol and experience what a thriving state we really are."

For decades, The Council of State Governments' MLC Annual Meeting has brought together the Midwest's legislators for the chance to learn, network and collaborate across state and international lines — in a nonpartisan and friendly setting. It also showcases a great city and state of the Midwest. Kunesh and her Minnesota legislative colleagues will carry on this tradition, serving as hosts of the 80th Annual Meeting of the MLC. Registration will open soon at *csgmidwest.org*.

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MLC Saint Paul MINNESOTA MIDWESTERN LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE