

## Iowa Senate Majority Leader

# MIKE KLIMESH

Former small-town mayor reflects on his rapid ascension within his caucus' leadership structure



**B**efore becoming one of the top-ranking officials in the Iowa Senate, Mike Klimesh served over two decades as the mayor of Spillville — a city with a population of less than 400 people located in the northeast part of the state.

Every day, he learned, could bring with it a different task or require something new. “If I started off the morning and there was a slight improvement I could make to the city — whether it was helping my maintenance guy mow lawns or running a grant for our museum — I felt like I had achieved something that moved the needle and made Spillville a better place,” Klimesh says.

“My entire goal when running the city of Spillville, and I know this sounds kind of cliché, was to leave it better than I found it at the end of the day.”

He views his work today in Des Moines, as a lawmaker and legislative leader, in much the same way.

“Being a great public servant is doing things that don’t require the limelight to be shined upon you,” he says. “3.2 million Iowans look to the Legislature to pass policy that makes their lives better, and I approach the job with a serious tone.”

Klimesh first won election to the Senate in 2020 (after two unsuccessful House campaigns) and soon ascended to leadership positions, including serving as assistant majority leader and Transportation Committee chair starting in 2023 and then as majority whip.

Klimesh’s legislative peers tapped him as Senate Republican majority leader in September 2025.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Klimesh shared the lessons he has learned from serving in local and state government, and provided insight on his caucus’ priorities for the year ahead. *Here are excerpts, with questions and answers lightly edited for clarity and brevity.*



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**Q:** Could you describe how your previous experience as a small-town mayor guides how you approach your role as a state lawmaker?

**A:** As mayor of a small community, you find yourself doing several things. You find yourself filling in for the maintenance guy when he’s out sick. You find yourself wrangling a budget and working with city employees. I think that perspective of local government experience, of serving on several county boards as a result of being mayor, helps to give you some institutional knowledge of how state government can affect local government.

**Q:** You quickly moved up the ranks of leadership since joining the Senate. What lessons did you learn along the way about earning respect and trust from your fellow members, as a legislative colleague and as a leader?

**A:** In addition to being mayor, I also ran a business for 30 years. ... Part of what drives me, and part of what drove me in business or even being mayor, was to learn as much as I can about any issue that’s in front of me. I’ve always been

somebody who wants to absorb as much knowledge as I can to help make good, informed decisions.

When I came into the Iowa Senate, I took that same approach. I would read literally almost every bill that was coming out of committee. I would definitely read every bill that went to the floor. I was able to add value in conversations, and my colleagues watched how I worked and realized that I’m very much an “in the weeds” kind of guy. Sometimes that works to my detriment, but most of the time it doesn’t.

I think they developed a level of understanding as to how I work. If Mike Klimesh is going to come in and write a piece of legislation, and he’s going to work through the channels, he’s put a lot of thought and energy into making sure that piece of policy was the best possible crafted policy that he could make. It was that work ethic that they saw.

It’s been very humbling to go from assistant majority leader to whip to majority leader in a five-year time frame. And I take that trust that my caucus and my colleagues have given me extremely seriously.

**Q:** You also led a multi-year effort that culminated last year in the enactment of a new law banning drivers from using mobile devices (unless they are in hands-free mode). Why did you seek this ban and what kind of effect do you think it can have?

**A:** As I traveled around the state — and I travel 3.5 hours from my district to the Capitol one way — I became really aware of how young drivers, and even older drivers, had their eyes fixed on their cell phone, texting and driving. If you look at the [automobile] accident rate in states, I want to say that Iowa posted the lowest vehicle fatalities in 100 years. I want to attribute a lot of that to the hands-free bill.

We want to do everything we can do to try to save lives on Iowa’s roads, and distracted driving is a huge problem. We want to give tools to law enforcement that make it easier for them to enforce. ... For six months [prior to the law going into full effect on Jan. 1], law enforcement officers could issue warning citations. That was designed to bring a level of awareness because it’s a habit, it’s a learned behavior, and we needed to find a way that we could ease people out of that.

**Q:** The final version of the “hands free” law exempted farm workers operating husbandry equipment. What was the rationale for that?

**A:** Iowa’s an [agriculture] state. Husbandry includes a large variety of vehicles traveling down the road. If it’s a tractor or if it’s a combine, the rate of speed for those vehicles is much less than a vehicle traveling down an interstate or highway. And most of that traffic is confined to our gravel road system. That was a compromise. That was something we could agree with, especially considering how important a part agriculture plays in Iowa’s economy.

**Q:** For the year ahead, what issues do you expect to be priorities for your caucus and the Legislature?

**A:** We’re focusing a lot of energy on property tax reform this year. We did a bill in 2022, and that bill actually had a sunset on it. So we want to continue the conversation [that began last spring]. Last year, we saw three different iterations of property tax reform come out of the Senate and the House. We didn’t finish the conversation last year, so that is one of the first conversations for this session.

Interview by Derek Cantù ([dcantu@csg.org](mailto:dcantu@csg.org))

## IOWA SENATOR MIKE KLIMESH

- Elected majority leader in 2025; first elected to the Iowa Senate in 2020
- Served as the mayor of Spillville, Iowa, for a total of 22 years
- Previously worked as the plant manager of a printing company
- 2022 graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development
- Has a bachelor’s degree in political science from Luther College
- Lives in Spillville with his wife, Kate; they have one child



## Indiana Senate Assistant Minority Leader

## ANDREA HUNLEY

Classroom to statehouse: Former principal brings lessons in school leadership to new legislative role



PROFILE



As an educator, Andrea Hunley always strived to make long-lasting impacts: find ways of providing students with opportunities to develop learning skills that they can use beyond the classroom and throughout their lives.

During her two decades with Indianapolis Public Schools, Hunley taught high school English and eventually served as the principal of a K-8 school. Then, in 2022, she explored a new challenge, and a new way to make a difference in her community. She ran for a seat in the Indiana Senate.

"I saw [it] as another way to serve young people," Hunley says, "because all of the policies that [the legislature] makes have generational impact, whether that's impacting folks today or whether that's 10, 20, 30 years from now."

She won a crowded primary race and was victorious in that year's general election. In addition to regularly sharing her professional insights on proposed educational initiatives, Hunley has found success in co-sponsoring legislation related to foster care. An adoptee from the foster care system herself when she was younger, Hunley has helped pass legislation allowing teens in foster care to open checking accounts and has worked to extend a state tax credit program for foster care families.

Less than two years into her legislative tenure, Hunley's colleagues selected her to become the second-highest ranking member of the Senate Democratic Caucus. In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Hunley shared how she has approached this role with an emphasis on belonging and reflection, while also providing insights on caucus priorities for 2026. *Here are excerpts, with questions and answers lightly edited for clarity and brevity.*

**Q:** How does your previous experience as an educator influence your approach to state education policy?

**A:** I enjoy being on the [Senate] Education Committee, and I enjoy getting into the weeds on policy about education. ... But, if I could have my way, we wouldn't make changes to state education policy for a while.

The majority of the bills that pass about education are changing something — starting a new initiative, a new training requirement, new curriculum requirements. Educators can't catch their breath because there are so many changes happening all the time, and it takes time to implement a change to see if it's working.

**Q:** What lessons in leadership that you learned as a school principal are you able to incorporate into your current role as a legislative leader?

**A:** Educators, teachers and administrators focus on solutions. We identify the problem and determine the solution, and then work collaboratively to get there. That's the exact same energy and ethos that I bring into the statehouse, where I want to look at [finding] solutions and work with my colleagues, on both sides of the aisle, to collaborate and make sure that we can get something done.

We know, too, as educators, that all the work we do is relational. It's about

understanding where people are at and where they're coming from and listening. It's the same way in the statehouse, especially here in Indiana, where everyone seems to know everybody.

**Q:** How do you build those relationships and create that kind of positive culture in a legislative setting?

**A:** I really work hard to make this space a little more personal. It's hard because we're a part-time legislature, which I think has a lot of benefits, but everyone is running in from their other jobs or they're thinking about what's going on back home in their districts. It's just so busy.

One of the things that I've worked to do in my role as assistant leader is to help us take a moment to pause, to reflect, to thank each other, to slow down, to consider the work and the weight of the work.

I created an art installation in our caucus room [featuring] artists from across the state of Indiana. We brought in some fresh artwork that will help people slow down when we're in this space, but also make it feel very different because the work we do is hard. And we've got to care for ourselves so that we can care for our constituents.

**Q:** You have been a prominent voice in speaking out against acts of sexual harassment, including in the legislature

**“All of the policies that the legislature makes have generational impact, whether that's impacting folks today or whether that's 10, 20, 30 years from now.”**

**itself. How are you and others trying to address some of the changes in culture that you think need to be made?**

**A:** What has changed is how things are being implemented, and the conversations that are happening around it. For example, our [mandatory] trainings have become more interactive. It's not just clicking through a slide deck or watching a video. It's actually working through scenarios in small groups to discuss what's the most just outcome or if something qualifies as sexual harassment or inappropriate behavior. That helps to change culture. ...

In terms of changes that I would like to still see, we don't have a way to anonymously report, and we also do not have a guarantee of privacy or anonymity when someone does come and brings forth a report.

We're also not required to seek outside counsel. Should someone bring a complaint to the Ethics Committee, the committee is made up of members of the legislature. I think it would be very hard for someone to bring a complaint against a legislator — going in front of a panel of their own peers to determine what the outcome should be or what

any potential consequences should be. I believe [outside counsel] should be a requirement.

**Q:** Could you describe what issues you and your caucus are prioritizing?

**A:** We have real needs around child care, our health care, affordable housing. And utility bills are just skyrocketing. Our caucus has priority bills in each of those four areas.

For my district, specifically in the health care space, I've got our largest health care provider [Indiana University] Health, I have the largest medical school at IU-Indianapolis, and I have Eli Lilly as well as Anthem headquartered here. ... That makes things challenging, but also it gives us a lot of opportunity to get the players around the table.

We're looking at maternal health challenges around providing doula supports and services to community health workers. We're tackling our policies on advanced-practiced registered nurses to make sure that they can work through the full scope of their licensure. And then also we're looking at how we can support those who utilize prosthetics and orthotics to make the costs cheaper or free.

Interview by Derek Cantù ([dcantu@csg.org](mailto:dcantu@csg.org))



## INDIANA SENATOR ANDREA HUNLEY

- Elected assistant minority leader in 2024; first elected to the Indiana Senate in 2022
- Previously worked for Indianapolis Public Schools as an English teacher and later as the principal of a K-8 school
- 2023 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development
- Has bachelor's and master's degrees in education from Indiana University
- Lives in Indianapolis with her husband, Ryan, and their two children