

Ohio Sen. Cliff Hite

Still known as “Coach” among many constituents, longtime educator has become state and regional leader during 10-year legislative career

by Ilene Grossman (igrossman@csg.org)

When you first meet Ohio Sen. Cliff Hite, it won't take long to figure out that he was a high school coach.

He is an outgoing man with an enthusiasm that touches everyone he meets, and in the northwest Ohio region that he has represented for 10 years, Sen. Hite is still known as “Coach” among many of his constituents.

Others remember him as their history and government teacher. He taught for 30 years, and after he retired, Hite's former students were among those hoping that he would run for an open seat in the Ohio House. After all, it was a way to give back to the community — a message that Hite had been imparting to young people for decades.

“I always thought that teaching was giving back, but evidently my students didn't,” Hite jokes about their encouragement that he run for office.

Along with these nudges to run, Hite says politics “was just in the DNA” for him and his family. It was the center of many dinner table discussions among his parents (both of whom were teachers) and three older siblings. Growing up, Hite had three older sisters; two were Democrats, and he and the other sister were Republicans. While they argued all the time, they loved each other.

Hite figured that's how politics worked.

After years of thinking about American government and a career of teaching it, Hite has spent the last 10 years in the legislative arena. He shared his unique perspective, and discussed some of his legislative accomplishments and his state's policy challenges, in a recent interview with CSG Midwest.

Q: What did you learn when you came to the Ohio General Assembly that you didn't expect?

A: When I got to Columbus, I thought I should go back to my students and tell them there is a little more to politics and government than we tell them in our textbooks. Not that the difference was bad or good; it was just much more involved than I thought. The negotiations to get a bill passed are very important. That's the good thing about what I did for a living; I enjoy interacting with all kinds of people and being a part of the process.

Q: How has your experience as a football player and a coach impacted your approach to working with your legislative colleagues?

A: As a coach, you are always in the fray. In politics, there are times when a group is flailing on an issue and they need a coach. They need someone to bring them together and remind them where they need to go to get the result they want. I am called on to do that many times — to help people work out their differences and get on the same page. That's what you have to do as a football coach, and to be a successful legislator.

Bio-sketch of Ohio Sen. Cliff Hite

- ✓ elected to Ohio House in 2006; joined state Senate in 2011
- ✓ serves as chair of Ohio Senate Agriculture Committee
- ✓ 2008 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development; served as co-chair of BILLD Steering Committee for four years
- ✓ serves as first vice chair of CSG's Midwestern Legislative Conference; will become chair in 2018
- ✓ retired teacher and coach; member of the Hancock County Sports Hall of Fame
- ✓ he and his wife, Diane, have three grown children and four granddaughters



Q: How would you describe your style as a legislator and your approach to working with constituents?

A: I have always felt it is not who is right but what's right. I will work with anyone to get something done. I make it a point to have friends on both sides of the aisle. But sometimes I turn into Coach Hite, and people can be surprised by that. I get frustrated when we can't accomplish something.

I think my constituents find that I am accessible and will talk to them, no matter what, even if they are unbelievably upset about something. I will let them say their peace and let them know where I stand.

Q: What legislation have you sponsored that you are most proud of and why?

A: I lost a niece to bacterial meningitis when she was 4 years old, and I worked to get required vaccinations for schoolchildren [for meningococcal disease]. The legislation, known as Tessa's Law [SB 121, passed in 2015], will make a huge difference. It was very difficult for me to testify for the bill, but it will help to save lives. Even as the bill was being discussed, it helped to get the word out about vaccinations.

Q: What do you believe are some of the biggest challenges ahead for the Ohio General Assembly?

A: I would say our biggest challenge is education. There are too many people who want to change things all the time, and we lack consistency. The kids are suffering from that, and so are the teachers and administrators, and even school boards.

We have over-tested kids and over-penalized teachers, and we've got to get back to allowing the creativity of our individuals that are in education to flourish. We've stymied that creativity in favor of accountability. Being a teacher or administrator is a tough job, tougher than it has ever been, and there aren't enough people who understand what it's like to be in a school or a classroom.

Everyone thinks they are an expert on education because they went to school. If they understood all the requirements that are thrown at teachers, and the regulations, we might be able to allow these teachers to continue with the passion that got them into the classroom in the first place. We've got to fix this, and that is one of my goals in the next few years. ★

As 2018 chair of MLC, Sen. Hite will help lead planning for meeting in Manitoba

Ohio Sen. Cliff Hite has long been an active leader in CSG's Midwestern Legislative Conference — the nonpartisan association of all legislators from 11 U.S. states and four affiliate provinces.

Next year, he will take over as MLC chair, and among his duties will be helping plan the group's 73rd Annual Meeting. It will be held in Winnipeg, Manitoba, marking the third time that an MLC Annual Meeting has been held in a Canadian province.

“The networking with so many different people from so many places exposes you to a lot of good ideas, and you can bring some of these ideas back to your state,” Hite says.

“The MLC meeting and programs like BILLD [a legislative leadership program of the MLC] help give you the confidence that you can do things in your state as a legislator. The meeting participants are ordinary people doing extraordinary things, and you can be a part of that if you listen, take notes and interact. The process is invigorating.”



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