



# South Dakota Rep. Brian Gosch

Listen and learn, then lead: Early experiences as legislator helped prepare him for success as head of party caucus

by Cindy Andrews ([candrews@csg.org](mailto:candrews@csg.org))

**H**e worked for the South Dakota Legislature as a college intern, earned a degree in political science, and then went on to a successful legal career.

But as much as Brian Gosch's story reads like a blueprint for how to become a state legislator, it might never have happened if not for the mid-term retirement of his local House representative and a phone call from then-Gov. Mike Rounds.

The call came in 2007, and ever since Gosch accepted the invitation to join the South Dakota House as the governor's appointee, he has been making the most of the opportunity to serve the state and his home district of Rapid City.

A close win in the general election soon followed Gosch's initial appointment, and then came a quick rise into the leadership ranks of the House Republican caucus. He has served as party whip, speaker pro tempore and speaker.

Now in his final two years in the House (due to the state's legislative term limits), Gosch is House majority leader.

It has been a challenging, rewarding time to serve in the Legislature — from a multiyear fight against a devastating infestation of mountain pine beetles in the Black Hills, to historic reforms of the state's criminal and juvenile justice systems.

And throughout his tenure as a legislator and legislative leader, Gosch has focused on what he views as his home state's core strengths.

"If you are looking for a family-oriented, pro-business, low-tax state," he says, "South Dakota's your place."

Gosch has called the state home for most of his life.

Born in Aberdeen, a city located in the northern part of South Dakota, he now resides in Rapid City, which attracts visitors from around the world with its proximity to Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills. (Tourism is, in fact, South Dakota's second-largest revenue-producing industry.)

Outside the Legislature, Gosch works as a staff attorney for South Dakota Advocacy Services, which provides legal services to people with disabilities. He directs the group's work in helping Social Security recipients with disabilities begin or return to work.

Gosch and his wife have six children.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Gosch reflected on his experiences in South Dakota's part-time Legislature and discussed his role in leadership. Here are excerpts from the interview.

**Q: You were initially appointed to the House, but soon after your first election in 2008, you pursued a path in leadership. Why did you choose that path, and have you enjoyed being a leader?**

**A:** I had a very difficult general election against a Democrat with a lot of name recognition (he was a former lieutenant governor candidate). I was feeling somewhat euphoric after that hard-fought win, so then I took a look at running for [party] whip.

Yes, I enjoy it. As you can imagine, [being in leadership] has its pluses and minuses. It is a lot more work for the same little pay. It's got some difficult and stressful components to it, but someone's got to do it, and I work hard and try to do a good job.

**Q: You are now serving as House majority leader. How did you try to earn the trust and respect of colleagues to become a legislative leader?**

**A:** Starting out, it's doing a lot of listening and learning, seeing what works and what doesn't work, and making friends and doing a good job with the things you're involved with — whether it is bills you are carrying, or how you perform in committee and on the floor. It's about asking intelligent questions and making intelligent points and votes.

By doing that, you earn the respect of your colleagues. And once you get a leadership spot, even an introductory one, it goes again to how you perform. ... Your colleagues see that, and it rolls over to your next election.

**Q: How would you describe your legislative leadership style?**

**A:** Work hard. Still try to listen, to understand. Be as fair as possible, as objective as possible, and then be protective of my caucus and its wishes — to some extent be a lawyer for them.

**Q: This past year, you were a primary sponsor of a bill that makes major changes to the state's juvenile justice system, in part by creating new financial incentives for counties to divert more juveniles away from the courts and instead toward community-based programs. Why was it time for the state to make this policy change?**

**A:** There wasn't one particular incident, but we learned that we were incarcerating

## Bio-sketch of South Dakota Rep. Brian Gosch

- ✓ first appointed to South Dakota House in 2007; first elected in 2008
- ✓ current House majority leader; previously served as party whip, speaker pro tempore and speaker
- ✓ works for South Dakota Advocacy Services as staff attorney and director of Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security
- ✓ has bachelor's degree in political science and law degree from University of South Dakota

more juveniles than all our surrounding states and spending too much money at the county and state levels. We want to keep juveniles in the community when they are not a danger to themselves or members of the community. ...

Focus on the different third-party providers in the community to work with those students to keep them out of prison, keep them in the community and help lower the rate of recidivism.

**Q: Along with all of the work you do in Pierre, you have a job outside the Legislature and are the father of six children. How do you try to manage all of those responsibilities?**

**A:** It is a delicate balance. My first session was just after we had our fifth child. My wife is a CPA who is incredibly busy with tax season during our session, which generally runs from early January to the end of March. That initial change — from having me around to help and communicating regularly, to not being around and communication becoming spotty with the demands of the Legislature — was very difficult.

She would call me sometimes with a baby crying into the phone and express frustration over me not being more accessible by phone at all times. I recall such a phone call after one floor session, and I offered to drive home that night and skip the rest of the week. There was a long pause and she said, "No, you can stay."

The point is that family comes first, and I advise that to all of my caucus members. You have to be willing to walk away and take care of family.

**Q: Do you have any other advice for new legislators?**

**A:** To remain humble ... to remember if they go two or three houses down their block, nobody knows who they are. And to work hard, but don't try to do too much your first year. Don't carry anything too difficult until you learn the process and learn the players. ★

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