



# Nebraska Sen. Kate Sullivan

Lawmaker relishes chance to help constituents, and now has eyes on creating a long-term vision for state education policy

by Tim Anderson ([tanderson@csg.org](mailto:tanderson@csg.org))

I've never in need of a reminder of why she serves in the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature, Sen. Kate Sullivan can peer into her garden — home to one of the most gratifying gifts she has ever received.

It is a rose given to her by a family appreciative of what Sullivan had done very early in her legislative career. At that time, a regional facility for people with developmental disabilities was downsizing, and the family's loved one faced the loss of services — and a home — as a result.

Sullivan intervened, advocated on behalf of the family and helped keep their loved one at the regional center.

"It has been one of the most remarkable things about being here," Sullivan says about the opportunity as one of the state's 49 senators to help constituents.

"You get hundreds of e-mails, and you hear from people with legitimate concerns. You want to help them all you can, and in some cases, it doesn't take a change in public policy. It takes having a great [legislative] staff and having a good working relationship with the state agencies and others."

Sen. Sullivan was first elected in 2008, and her six years in the Unicameral have allowed her to continue a longtime commitment to being an active member of her community and state. She previously served 12 years as a school board member in Cedar Rapids, a small town in Nebraska.

Her roots in rural Nebraska run deep.

She and her husband, Mike, have lived in Cedar Rapids for 30-plus years where they raised their two daughters and continue to operate the local community bank. She is also involved in a farm operation that has been in her family for more than 100 years.

After her daughters had grown up, Sullivan says, it was time to take on a new challenge — running for a seat in the state's unique Unicameral Legislature.

Politics and public leadership had long interested Sullivan.

As a child, she recalls her father — a charter member of a local public power district — going from farmstead to farmstead, trying to convince neighbors to sign up for rural electricity.

"He instilled in me the importance of public service," Sullivan says. "He was a farmer, but also had a vision for his community."

Much of Sullivan's vision for Nebraska now centers on what she calls "the great equalizer," schools and the opportunities they provide people.

As chair of the Unicameral Education Committee, which oversees both K-12 and postsecondary education policy, she is in a unique position to turn that vision into reality.

Earlier this year, CSG Midwest spoke to Sen. Sullivan about her priorities as chair of the Education Committee and her reflections on serving in the nation's only nonpartisan, one-house state legislature. Here are excerpts from that interview.

**Q: What is going to be your focus over the next few years as chair of the Education Committee?**

## Bio-sketch: Sen. Sullivan

- ✓ member of Nebraska Unicameral Legislature since 2009
- ✓ chair of Education Committee
- ✓ 2010 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD) and vice chair of Midwestern Legislative Conference's BILLD Steering Committee
- ✓ serves on board of directors for Cedar Rapids State Bank and as president of Kokes Corp. family farm
- ✓ former 12-year member of Cedar Rapids School Board

**A:** Education [K-12 and postsecondary] commands over 47 percent of our state budget, so funding of the system has always been front and center. But I think the time has come to shift the conversation away from just money to what our priorities and vision should be for education policy.

We are seeing so many changes in education right now — whether it be this age of accountability, changes in federal policy, or all of the new challenges that our school districts have had laid at their doorsteps.

I expect my priority bill for this session to be a proposal to embark on a strategic planning process. The idea is to create a framework that forces all the different entities in education to start talking to one another. What I hope is that we will end up with literally a road map of our policy priorities in education and how to accomplish them. Then we can decide what resources can be put behind meeting those priorities.

**Q: What do you see as the value of the Legislature investing more time and energy into long-term planning for the state?**

**A:** One of things I've become more and more cognizant of because of term limits is the importance of things like legislative planning and visioning. For example, we now have a legislative committee devoted to planning for the future.

Each year, we look at issues that are of concern to the state. We research them and we produce policy briefs on how to address them.

When our legislative planning committee first started, there was some anxiousness on the part of the chairs of the standing committees that we were taking away some of their responsibilities. But that couldn't be further from the truth. So many times, the chairs of standing committees are almost in a situation of having to react, but these planning efforts now allow them to be more proactive.

**Q: You're now in your sixth year of serving in the nation's only nonpartisan, one-house legislature. What are some of the things that stand out to you about how the process works?**

**A:** People find out very early on here, even if they start out being quite partisan, that you are going to be much more effective as a policymaker if you are true to a system that is meant to be nonpartisan. That in and of itself is a reason the system works.

The other hallmark of our Unicameral, and one that I try to mention to my constituents every time I talk about it, is the openness of the system. We have 461 [introduced] bills this year, and every single one of them receives a public hearing. That is so valuable.

Overall, too, there is such accessibility and transparency. I don't see how anyone in the state can say they are not privy to what is going on in the Legislature, because we really are out there and take it as a point of pride to be a citizen's legislature. ★

## Women in leadership: A review of committee chairs in state legislatures

Nebraska Sen. Kate Sullivan is one of eight women serving as the chair of an education policy committee in the 11-state Midwest.

In all, 86 women lead one of the region's 451 standing legislative committees — amounting to a rate of 19 percent. (Close to 40 percent of the Midwest's education committee chairs are women.)

The percentage of committee-chair positions held by women varies widely among states in the Midwest — from a high of 36 percent in Illinois to a low of 7 percent in Indiana, a CSG Midwest analysis shows.

A nationwide study done by Rutgers University's Center for American Women and Politics also showed wide variances — 77 percent of the legislative committee chairs in Colorado were women in 2013, while no women held such positions in

**% of state's standing legislative committee chairs who are women**



Source: CSG Midwest

South Carolina. Overall, the study found, women accounted for 19 percent of the committee chairs in U.S. state legislatures. About 24 percent of the nation's state legislators are women.