



North Dakota Sen. Tim Flakoll

Longtime educator and college administrator has a passion for giving all students a ‘passport’ to success through a quality education

by Kate Tormey (ktormey@csg.org)

Being a state lawmaker often involves examining big-picture items. But for Sen. Tim Flakoll, leading his state also comes down to helping individual North Dakotans.

One anecdote that helps him remember this goal comes from one of his first sessions in the legislature. He was getting ready to leave his house for the Capitol when a neighbor knocked on his door.

She sat down and told him her son had been diagnosed with a rare metabolic condition that required expensive care and medications to keep him alive. Flakoll agreed to sponsor a bill that helped provide care and support for the 11 families in the state affected by similar conditions. And for the years following, he took great pride in seeing that young man playing in the yard with his sister.

“Sometimes legislators think it’s about knocking down the big issues — but in reality it’s about helping one family, one kid at a time,” he says.

Flakoll takes this philosophy into his policy work on education, too. He has spent more than three decades in the field, as an educator and administrator. In addition to being the provost of Tri-College University, an agreement between three schools in the Fargo-Moorhead area, he is chair of the North Dakota Senate Education Committee.

“There are times when I have to ask, ‘Which person are you asking to this meeting, Tim Flakoll the provost or Tim Flakoll, chair of the Senate Education Committee?’ And sometimes it ends up being a little bit of both,” he says.

And the policy expertise makes him a good fit to represent his Fargo district, where each day 1 in 6.5 people goes to a higher-education campus as faculty, student or staff. One in 3.5 people goes to a K-12 school or college campus.

Flakoll’s own educational background is in animal science, but he has translated his experiences into a variety of ventures, such as serving as the general manager of a minor-league baseball team, teaching animal science, consulting on business startups and even doing movie reviews for a local radio station.

“A lot of learning is about transferability to whatever situation you find yourself in,” he says. “To be successful, it is not always about being lucky, but it’s also about finding the right niche and having the passion for what you want to do.”

Flakoll is the incoming chair of the Midwestern Legislative Conference. (CSG Midwest provides staffing services to this nonpartisan association of state legislators.) He will lead the organization in 2015 and will help host its Annual Meeting in Bismarck, N.D., on July 12-15.

“I have been fortunate to work with many talented and dedicated public servants and experts,” he says. Here are some excerpts from a recent interview with CSG Midwest.

Q: You spent six years in the front office of the Fargo-Moorhead RedHawks, a minor league baseball team. How did that experience translate into your legislative work?

Bio-sketch of Sen. Flakoll

- ✓ first elected to the North Dakota Senate in 1998; current president pro tem
- ✓ chair of the Senate Education Committee, was chair of the Agriculture Committee for 10 years
- ✓ provost of Tri-College University, a partnership between three area colleges
- ✓ academic training at NDSU, Harvard University and University of Oxford
- ✓ will serve as the Midwestern Legislative Conference chair in 2015

A: In the front office, we can’t control the wins and losses to a certain degree. But we can help make sure that we are fully prepared when the gates open in the spring, much like when the legislative session starts — if we have done a lot of homework in advance of the session or the season, that really pays dividends in terms of ensuring a successful product.

Beyond wins and losses, some of it was providing quality of life for people. It was affordable family fun, with \$1 hot dogs, etc. ... In a way, education is also about quality of life. In attaining an education, that is your passport to a better life — economically because you have more earning potential, but the data show that people are healthier, too.

We wanted [fans] to feel that they were connected to us, so we spent a lot of time listening so they felt they owned part of the team in a way. ... We’re in this together, and we wanted to give them the sense that we have done the best with what we have. And in the legislature, I want them to know that as their representative, I will try to come up with the best solutions possible.

Q: You helped pass a new higher-education funding formula that you hope will be one of your legacies as a legislator. Can you explain the bill?

A: Instead of a budget process where we said, “What did they get last time? Let’s add 6 percent or 10 percent to it,” it’s now based on successful credits completed [by the school’s students] and also accounts for more-costly programs to deliver. For example, nursing is a much more expensive program to deliver than a course where you can put 100 students in a lecture.

It took a lot of time and there was a lot of hard work put into it, but in the end we passed something that has been embraced. Other states are looking at it to see if that is something they want to copy.

Q: You also used your agricultural background on a recent bill regarding humane treatment of animals. What did the bill do?

A: We did not have a felony penalty on the books for the most egregious crimes, or enough clarity in our law, so there was a working group that looked at that issue for a couple of years.

I was the prime sponsor of the bill and helped shepherd it through pretty choppy waters. It makes sure there is a defined process, so people don’t have to worry that if they are half an hour late watering their animals, they are going to get thrown into jail. The new law protects animals and animal owners.

Q: You were also instrumental in putting together a major reform of North Dakota’s K-12 school system about five years ago. Can you talk about the merit scholarships included in the bill?

A: We incentivized greater rigor through merit scholarships [for students who achieved certain grade-point averages and standardized test scores]. We knew that not everyone could achieve that level of rigor, but we felt it would benefit them if they could, and we felt that those would be the students who went to two- and four-year colleges.

If we gave them a reward for taking a more rigorous course plan, and performing better on the ACTs, those families would really get behind it — and they embraced it.

When we required more rigor in high school, it is amazing how much that contributed to much better student outcomes in college.

That is what North Dakota has been trying to focus on: We need students to perform at their highest level. One of the things we try to do is to challenge the student who is a highflier as much as we challenge a C student as much as a student at the far end of the spectrum.

With each of those students, you want to challenge them as much as possible, not teach to the C student only. Otherwise, we are devaluing those high-achieving students by not challenging them enough. We saw, without a doubt, when we challenge our students in North Dakota, they will respond.

Q: You also worked on a bill that put in place new curriculum requirements for graduation. Can you talk about the legislation?

A: We put in place, for the first time, curriculum requirements for graduation to make things much more uniform. ...What we want in our education system is that if students move from one district or system to another, we don’t want them to be held back, but move through very seamlessly.

Because of the oil boom, we have a lot of people who are migratory in North Dakota, and we have a lot of new Americans in the eastern part of the state. We need to make sure they have consistent outcomes, and at the end the day, we want you to go from one place to the next without being hampered. We also want people to be able to move from eighth grade to high school and to successfully migrate from high school to college at any of the campuses in our state. 📍