I’m developing innovative technology that takes used nuclear fuel and generates electricity to power our future and protect the environment.

America’s innovators are discovering advanced nuclear energy technologies to smartly and safely meet our growing electricity needs while preventing greenhouse gases.

Bill Gates and Jose Reyes are also advancing nuclear energy options that are scalable and incorporate new safety approaches. These designs will power future generations and solve global challenges, such as water desalination.

Nuclear energy supplies nearly one-fifth of our electricity. In a recent poll, 85% of Americans believe nuclear energy should play the same or greater future role.

Get the facts at nei.org/future
#futureofenergy
STATE LEGISLATURES
NCSL’s national magazine of policy and politics

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“It’s not just an urban problem; it’s a rural problem. It’s not just under the viaducts in the big cities. It’s also a suburban problem.”
—NCSL’s Karmen Hanson on how widespread heroin use is, in Stateline Today

“The number of bills is remarkable.”
—NCSL’s Richard Cauchi, noting in newsmax.com more than 700 bills relating to the Affordable Care Act were filed in state legislatures in 2014 or carried over from 2013

“Lots of research shows that women tend to be more collaborative and compromising.”
—NCSL’s Katie Ziegler on efforts to get more women to serve in state legislatures, in the Charleston Daily Mail

“All states allow parents to opt out of required vaccines for medical reasons … [nearly all do] for religious reasons, and at least 20 states do for philosophical or personal beliefs.”
—NCSL’s Kristine Goodwin, in The Wall Street Journal, about state immunization laws

Heather Morton, NCSL liaison to New Hampshire by day and hobbyist photographer by night, wanted to capture what it’s like when the New Hampshire House—the nation’s largest with 400 members—is in action. State Supreme Court Chief Justice Linda Stewart Dalianis, left, shakes hands with Governor Margaret Wood Hassan (D), following the governor’s annual budget address. Looking on are House Speaker Shawn Jasper (R) and Senate President Chuck Morse (R).

NCSL staff gathered in front of its headquarters in Denver to show support for Nevada Senator and NCSL President Debbie Smith, who recently underwent surgery. You can tweet your support with #SendingYouStrengthDebbie.
Dear Editor:

I read with interest the very-fitting tribute to Karl Kurtz published in the December 2014 issue. In it, Karl is quoted saying “most state legislatures are in situations that are just as polarized as is Congress, but most of them are able to reach settlements and negotiate differences in the way Congress is not able to.”

I believe a major reason this is likely true is the presence and involvement of nonpartisan staff. While Congress does have nonpartisan research assistance, its effectiveness has been substantially mitigated by an increase in member and committee partisan staff.

In state legislatures, nonpartisan staff still play an active role in constructing state budgets, drafting bills, staffing committees, and researching issues. They are, however, much less involved than they were in the 1970s and 1980s.

Increasingly, nonpartisan staff are absent from the table when decisions are made. This practice diminishes the institutional history available to guide the differing parties. The more this increases, the more polarized state legislatures will become.

Nonpartisan staff agencies provide attention to legislative procedure and unadulterated information—two ingredients critical for feeding a legislative institution that is designed to foster compromises.

If organizations such as yours divert attention and resources away from nonpartisan staff and toward leadership and partisan staff, this marginalization will accelerate. Criticism can be directed toward me for being self-serving, but the past is proof that strong nonpartisan resources are a very important part of why state legislatures outperform the U.S. Congress in legislating.

Terry C. Anderson
Director, Legislative Council Staff
Wisconsin Legislature

YOUR TURN

NCSL State Services Director Corina Eckl met Academy Award-nominated actor backstage at “The Elephant Man” in New York City recently. It got us thinking, as public officials, you probably find yourselves hobnobbing with celebrities of all varieties—national and global political and religious figures, business leaders, authors, athletes, musicians and yes, even the occasional television or movie star. Send your photos with the famous to photos@ncsl.org so we can share them here and on NCSL’s Facebook page.

College and Career Readiness Standards
A Legislative Roadmap

States are making policy changes to meet new college- and career-readiness standards. This roadmap resource supports the work of legislators and staff implementing new CCR standards. It is a one-stop, interactive toolbox featuring the most up-to-date information and resources.

www.ncsl.org/CCRSroadmap

For more information contact Daniel Thatcher 303-856-1646 or daniel.thatcher@ncsl.org
Oregon Governor Kate Brown (D), who stepped in as chief executive after John Kitzhaber resigned in February, has named Jeanne Atkins to serve out the remaining 22 months of Brown’s vacated term as secretary of state. Atkins has held several key staff positions in the Oregon Legislative Assembly, as well as in Congress, and has been a candidate for the Oregon House twice. Atkins says she’s not interested in running for secretary of state in two years, which gives the three lawmakers who reportedly have shown interest in the position time to gather support. They are House Majority Leader Val Hoyle (D), Senate Majority Leader Diane Rosenbaum (D) and Senator Richard Devlin (D).

Oklahoma Senate President Pro Tem Brian Bingman (R) believes the Legislature should spend more time scrutinizing how it appropriates the state’s $7 billion budget. And he wants the people to decide whether they agree. He has introduced legislation that would dedicate every other session exclusively to the budget. “I would think that spending a whole session would give members the opportunity to really delve into it and … become more knowledgeable about why certain items are funded.” The House passed a similar proposal last year, but it never got a hearing in the Senate.

“When my server doesn’t hand me the flu with my steak … we’re all going to be a little bit better off.”

—South Dakota Senate Minority Whip Angie Buhl O’Donnell (D), after her proposal to require employers to offer paid sick leave was defeated, in the Associated Press.

“At one time, hieroglyphics was the way everyone communicated.”

—Arkansas Representative Nate Bell (R), speaking against a bill requiring cursive writing to be taught in schools, in the Associated Press.
“Am now receiving lots of calls from actual lobbyists. Even the false appearance of power gets their attention.”

—North Carolina Senator Jeff Jackson (D), aka #JustOneLegislator, in a series of tweets when he found himself alone in the Capitol during a February ice storm.

Maryland Senate Majority Leader Catherine Pugh (D) was elected president of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators in February. Pugh, a nine-year veteran of the Maryland legislature, began her political career on the Baltimore City Council. In 2005, she was appointed to an open seat in the Maryland House and was elected to the Senate in 2006. She is currently the president and CEO of her own public relations consulting firm and a former dean, banker, newspaper owner and talk show host. She founded the Baltimore Marathon, as well as the Fish Out of Water Project, designed to promote Baltimore tourism and to raise money for local youth arts programs and the Need to Read Campaign to help Baltimore residents of all ages learn to read. An author and poet, Pugh is featured in the article starting on page 14.

Newly elected New York Speaker Carl Heastie (D) has appointed Assemblyman Felix Ortiz (D) assistant speaker. Ortiz, who first won election to the Assembly in 1994, is the first Hispanic in the chamber’s history to hold the leadership position. Ortiz has chaired the Assembly Committees on Cities, Veterans Affairs, Mental Health and others. Ortiz has served on NCSL’s Executive Committee and is co-chair of its Task Force on International Relations. He is also the former chair of the National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators. Heastie retained two members from the leadership team of former Speaker Sheldon Silver: Herman Farrell (D) will continue to chair the Assembly Budget Committee and Joe Morelle (D) will continue on as majority leader, running the operations of the Assembly.

A former GOP Mississippi senator, whose district was erased after the 2000 reapportionment, has announced he is changing parties to run for lieutenant governor. Tim Johnson, who also served as a county alderman and county supervisor, is a businessman and sometimes Elvis impersonator. He says Republicans have failed to adequately fund schools, expand Medicaid and maintain highways. The incumbent, Lt. Governor Tate Reeves (R), is seeking his second term. The election is in November.

“We are hopeful that the year will be normal.”

—Iowa senior state fiscal analyst Jeff Robinson on expectations that a state revenue shortfall will be corrected when tax returns are filed, in The Des Moines Register.
Statistics confirm what most of us have observed: The average American family has changed so dramatically since the days of Ozzie and Harriet that it is difficult to even describe what a "typical" family is today. More folks are living together and having children before they marry, if they do at all. Those who do marry tend to be older. Divorce and single parenting are more common as are step- and mixed-race families. Gay and lesbian people are marrying and having children. The income earner is no longer only the male.

Americans continue to value family life. At least 76 percent of adults, surveyed by the Pew Research Center, say their family is the most important part of their lives, and more than 80 percent say their current family is as close or closer than the family they grew up in.

Families shape many economic, educational, labor and social conditions. Whether you view these changes as good or bad, these new family dynamics can test public policies designed in a different time for a different demographic. Knowing what reforms are needed, if any, and which ones will be the most effective and efficient, however, are the real challenges.

### Family Facts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>Today</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age of all Americans</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of men at first marriage</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of women at first marriage</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portion of adults who are married</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portion of young adults (18 to 32) who are married</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households with married couples raising children</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portion of births to single women</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women ages 15 to 24 who are mothers</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of children per woman</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wives who work outside the home</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portion of Americans who own their homes</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “Today” includes statistics between 2011 and 2013.

### I Do! But Later.

The median age when Americans first marry

![Graph showing the median age of first marriage](image)

### Baby, Oh Baby

The portion of births that are to unmarried parent(s)

- 1960: 5%
- 1970: 11%
- 1980: 18%
- 1990: 28%
- 2000: 33%
- 2010: 41%

### The Family’s Fine

How’s family life now compared to when you were growing up?

- Same—45%
- Closer—40%
- Less Close—14%

Eyewitnesses often provide information critical to criminal investigations and court cases. But when they incorrectly identify an innocent person as the culprit, it can result in the wrong person going to jail—and a guilty one remaining free to commit more crimes.

Mistaken identifications have been a factor in more than 70 percent of the 325 wrongful convictions overturned by post-conviction DNA evidence since 1989, according to the Innocence Project, an organization dedicated to exonerating wrongly convicted people.

Although no combination of procedures can prevent all mistakes in eyewitness identification, researchers, law enforcement personnel and state lawmakers continue to find ways to improve the accuracy of the process.

A 2014 study committee appointed by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) released a report detailing the best available scientific understanding of eyewitness identification, including everything from the nature of human memory to the soundness of the procedures used in witness identifications. To improve the reliability of eyewitness identifications and their use as evidence, the committee suggested:

• Conducting “blind” lineups in which even the person administering the lineup doesn’t know who the criminal suspect is.
• Video recording all lineups and eyewitnesses’ responses.
• Giving witnesses a uniform set of instructions before they view a lineup.
• Giving juries standardized instructions explaining the factors that could affect an eyewitness’s accuracy or recall, such as how much time has passed since the crime or whether the witness experienced trauma.
• Instructing juries to consider whether police followed proper procedures in dealing with evidence.

Currently, 18 states have passed legislation to study or regulate eyewitness identification procedures.

Last year, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland and Vermont enacted laws addressing many practices promoted by the NAS study committee, and Colorado and New Mexico have introduced similar bills this year.

—Rich Williams
What is Fair?

The Michigan Legislature is the latest to pass legislation that supporters hope will bring a greater level of fairness between Internet and brick-and-mortar retailers when it comes to sales taxes. The legislation requires large online retailers such as Amazon.com to collect and remit the state’s 6 percent sales tax.

Although all residents of the 45 states that tax sales are supposed to pay taxes on their online purchases, few do. This is partly due to two Supreme Court rulings—National Bellas Hess v. Illinois in 1967 and Quill Corp. v. North Dakota in 1992—that supported the “nexus” argument that retailers, including catalog and online sellers, need only collect sales taxes for the states where they have a physical presence, or “nexus.”

In 2008, New York State was the first to pass an “affiliate nexus law” that expanded the meaning of “nexus” to include work performed by entities within a state that could be attributed to an online or remote vendor, thus requiring the remote vendor to collect and remit New York sales tax.

Since 2008, Alabama, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont and West Virginia have enacted similar legislation to expand the definition of “nexus” in an effort to collect the taxes they are owed. While the laws’ effectiveness varies by state, generally they have not come close to helping states collect the amount of revenue many were anticipating.

In fact, some states may have lost revenue after enacting “affiliate legislation” when out-of-state vendors—in response to the legislation—severed relationships with in-state entities. In those cases, not only did states fail to gain the ability to collect sales taxes from the remote vendors, they also lost income tax revenue due to the hit in-state entities received when remote vendors cut their ties to the state.

Federal legislation such as the Marketplace Fairness Act in the Senate and the Remote Transactions Parity Act in the House, seek to remedy some of this by giving states the authority to require the collection of sales taxes by remote sellers. The National Taxpayers Union has estimated that states lose as much as $35 billion a year in uncollected taxes on remote sales.

—Max Behlke

Banking on Energy

As state policymakers continue to investigate ways to increase efficiency and develop renewable energy—as well as to bolster resiliency by making the energy system less vulnerable to outages—some are turning to energy banks. State energy banks (also known as “green” or “resilience” banks) are public-private partnerships that combine public funding with private capital and expertise to lower the cost of investing in renewable, resilient or efficient energy projects. These banks provide an array of financing tools that allow customers to make payments on low-interest loans while realizing the benefits of the project as soon as it is complete. Eligible projects include updating insulation in an older building, adding solar panels to a retail center or equipping a public building with technology to generate power during outages.

By coordinating these services in one place, proponents of this new type of energy financing believe states will be more successful at leveraging funds from the private sector. They will also benefit from the multiplier effect private sector investments often have, all while making technology more competitive and less expensive through broader adoption.

Energy banks can be tailored to meet states’ specific energy or environmental goals. For example, New Jersey’s Energy Resilience Bank was established after the extensive damage to energy and public infrastructure caused by Superstorm Sandy. The state announced the launch of the bank last fall, which is funded with $200 million from the state’s Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery allocation. The first series of projects will be upgrades to water and wastewater treatment plants, allowing plants to operate during power outages.

Connecticut, New Jersey and New York have established energy banks, and Maryland enacted legislation to study the issue during its 2014 session. Connecticut was the first when the legislature created the quasi-public Connecticut Energy Finance and Investment Authority in 2011. Funded with a mixture of private, state and federal funds, the goals of the bank are to help communities achieve energy security, improve the reliability of the energy supply, create jobs and support local economic development projects.

According to the authority’s 2013 annual report, it has invested more than $220 million, which has helped create 1,200 jobs and avoid 250,000 tons of greenhouse gas emissions. This is equivalent to removing 2,500 cars from the road. Future projects include financing retrofits to older buildings to increase their energy efficiency and installing fuel cells and other small-scale renewable energy producers.

—Jocelyn Durkay
President Obama’s proposal for a federal-state partnership to provide tuition-free community college across the country resembles a program created by the Tennessee General Assembly last year.

The Tennessee Promise scholarship and mentoring program gives recent high school graduates the opportunity to attend state community colleges without paying tuition or fees, starting next fall. More than 58,000 students (roughly 90 percent of high school seniors) completed scholarship applications last year for the program.

To pay for it, Tennessee created an endowment fund with most of the original support coming from $300 million of lottery reserve funds and $47 million in one-time state general fund dollars.

Several other states have discussed similar programs, and lawmakers in at least eight states have introduced legislation either to offer free community college or to set the groundwork to implement the president’s plan.

Obama’s proposal, “America’s College Promise,” would increase federal funding to cover three-quarters of the average community college tuition, but would require states to cover the rest. If all 50 states participate, the administration estimates the plan would benefit 9 million students a year and save each an average of $3,800 in tuition.

Congressional action is needed to implement the program, and the initial reaction has been unfavorable from Republicans, who say it’s outside the purview of the federal government and unaffordable.

Tennessee Promise scholarships are “last dollar” grants, meaning students must first exhaust all other sources of financial aid, including all federal Pell Grant aid. If all of the other sources of financial aid combined do not cover tuition, then students will receive a Promise Scholarship for the amount that is unmet.

Tennessee’s mentoring component of its program will be just as important for students’ success as the financial component, supporters say. Each Promise applicant is assigned a mentor to help them navigate the college-selection process. Research shows that at-risk students who work with a mentor are significantly more likely to aspire to attend college and enroll in degree programs.

In February, a bill to expand the program was working its way through the Tennessee General Assembly. Senator Mark Green (R) believes it “really cleans up some language for folks in the military,” by allowing high school students who chose military training over community college to also participate in the Promise scholarship program.

For the last few years, several state legislatures have been discussing how to make community college more affordable. Nearly every state offers programs for students to earn college credits or industry-certified credentials nearly free of charge and without having to enroll in a community or four-year college. The most common programs offer college-level courses to high school students. Despite differences in what states offer students through these dual-enrollment programs, research consistently shows that participants are more likely to stay in college and accumulate more college credits than comparison students.

—Suzanne Hultin and Dustin Weeden
ALL OR NOTHING

Although the Nebraska Legislature is nonpartisan (and unicameral), Nebraskans lean right: In 2014, 48 percent of registered voters were Republicans, 31 percent were Democrats, 20 percent were nonpartisan and 1 percent “other.” So, when one of the state’s five Electoral College votes went to Barack Obama in 2008, Republicans vowed to change the current split-vote system. Senator Beau McCoy (R) recently introduced a bill to have the state adopt a winner-take-all system similar to what is used in every other state except Maine. He argues that the current system—which awards electoral votes based on the winner in each congressional district—diminishes Nebraska’s voice in presidential elections. Opponents to the change counter that the current split-vote system encourages more people to become politically involved.

THE MICHIGAN PROPOSAL

Michigan lawmakers recently passed an innovative package of bills to help fund transportation projects. The legislation will increase the earned income tax credit for low-income families if voters approve a 1 percent sales tax increase in the May election. If they do, other changes will kick in, including replacing the current fixed gas tax with an indexed rate on the wholesale price of fuel. In its entirety, Proposition 1 is expected to raise $1.2 billion for roads, $300 million for K-12 education, $100 million for public transit and $95 million for local governments. Some critics claim the plan is a tax hike on the middle class in disguise. Others charge legislators with avoiding the difficult job of increasing taxes by passing the buck to voters. Supporters argue that good government should give citizens a say in all tax decisions that affect them. Few disagreements exist, however, over the need to repair the state’s transportation infrastructure. The American Society of Civil Engineers gave the state a “D” on its 2013 Report Card, noting that about 27 percent of the state’s bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete and 22 percent of its roads are in poor condition.

THEY WORK HARD FOR THE MONEY

Lawmakers and social workers are collaborating to improve the working conditions for exotic dancers in Oregon. As contract employees, adult entertainers usually don’t receive the same level of benefits and legal rights granted to other employees. The dancers want, among other things, better health and safety standards, such as clean stages and structurally sound poles, and a hotline to report abuses. Oregon has strong free speech rights that some say have encouraged the proliferation of strip clubs. Voters have rejected three constitutional amendments to strengthen regulations on the industry since 1994, according to Reuters.

CLOSED CASE ON OPEN MEETINGS

Members of city councils, school boards and other elected bodies could legally talk in private if a bill in the Arizona Senate passes. The law in most states, including in Arizona, requires that all such meetings be open to the public. The proposal by Senator Sylvia Allen (R) would maintain the open requirement only for certain actions, such as voting. Allen says allowing elected officials to talk privately would improve government. “There’s better government when elected officials—the ones who are responsible and accountable—have the freedom to be able to talk,” Allen told the Arizona Capitol Times. A representative of the First Amendment Coalition of Arizona voiced his concern that the bill would gut the state’s open meetings law, thus reducing the accountability and transparency of local governments.

TEEN PREGNANCY PREVENTER

A program that offers low-income women long-acting contraceptives such as intrauterine devices and hormonal implants is being credited with helping Colorado lower its teen birthrate by 40 percent between 2009 and 2013. A study conducted last summer found the state saved $42.5 million in 2010 in avoided Medicaid costs for prenatal care, hospital deliveries and infant care. The program’s private funding—$23.5 million from the Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation—ends this June, however, and it’s uncertain whether lawmakers will approve a $5 million funding bill now being debated.
6

**MEDICAL POT: NOT**

Lawmakers in North Dakota have gone against the tide by voting down a bill to make North Dakota the 24th state to legalize medical marijuana. According to the Grand Forks Herald, Representative Robin Weisz (R) said there was too much uncertainty over safety, quality and enforcement issues surrounding medical marijuana. “We just felt that the concerns and the risks at this point in time outweigh the potential benefits,” he said. The bill’s prime sponsor, Representative Pamela Anderson (D), argued it was “not a drug issue, but a quality of life” issue.

7

**SLIPPERY OIL PRICES**

The plunge in oil prices has made budgeting tough for lawmakers in North Dakota, the nation’s No. 2 oil producer. The Legislative Assembly must plan a two-year state budget while trying to estimate how low the price will go. They must also decide how to allocate shrinking revenues. A legislative panel predicted oil and gas tax revenues would drop 50 percent, from $8 billion to $4 billion. The House is debating a measure that would provide more than $1 billion to counties primarily in western North Dakota, where heavy drilling has lured thousands of workers and strained roads and services. Some lawmakers believe the oil depression is temporary, but others want to err on the side of conservative spending. One thing most agree on: Cuts to personal and corporate taxes are off the table.

8

**FAT CHANCE PROPOSAL**

Puerto Rican legislators are debating a bill that would fine parents of obese children, who currently make up 28 percent of children on the island territory. On the U.S. mainland, 18 percent of children are obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Senator Gilberto Rodriguez’s (PPD) bill calls for teachers to refer cases to a counselor, who would then work with the parents on a diet-exercise program monitored by monthly visits. Failure to improve within six months could result in a $500 fine, or $800 if the child is not slimmer within a year. Critics say the measure would stigmatize and shame children who suffer a disease. Public hearings began in February.

9

**PLASTIC IS SO LAST YEAR**

If Senator Tom Kean Jr. (R) has his wish, New Jersey will be the first state to issue electronic driver’s licenses. “An e-driver’s license will be more convenient for the vast majority of residents, while making one of the most-used government services more efficient and less costly,” says Kean, whose bill calls for the Motor Vehicle Commission to review the benefits and costs of an electronic driver’s license program. Residents would display their e-licenses on their smart phones or mobile devices, although plastic driver’s licenses would still be issued to those who want them. Kean argues New Jersey has an opportunity to be at the “forefront of technology.”

10

**SUPERVISION REQUIRED?**

The Supreme Court ruling in North Carolina State Board of Dental Examiners v. Federal Trade Commission reduces the authority of governors and state legislatures to staff state agencies, boards and commissions as they wish without having to “supervise” them. The case revolves around cease-and-desist letters sent by the North Carolina Board of Dental Examiners (made up mostly of dentists) to teeth whitening providers who were not dentists. The Federal Trade Commission responded by charging the board with violating federal antitrust law. Justice Kennedy, writing for the majority, argued that active supervision by the state was necessary when boards and commissions are made up of a majority of “market participants” to provide realistic assurance that an agency’s anticompetitive conduct “promotes state policy, rather than merely the party’s individual interests.”
Despite the rigors of lawmaking, some legislators manage to find the time to write a book, or two, or three.

BY MARK WOLF

Surveying the books produced by state legislators is akin to browsing the aisles of a good bookstore. Around one corner there’s public policy, around another, biographies and memoirs. Historical fiction is over there, local history is back against that wall, and poetry and children’s books are up near the front.

Lawmakers and former lawmakers have produced a lot of books, although none of them are likely to come anywhere near former Mississippi Representative John Grisham’s more than 25 novels. But their work is no less inspired. The book titles—like the authors—aim to engage, motivate and stimulate discussion. The following five lawmakers—a sampling from the many legislator-authors out there—do just that, by telling a good story.

Mark Wolf is an editor for NCSL.

Texas Senator Brian Birdwell

“I’d stopped moving. This is the end, I thought. I was still gasping for air; it felt as if I’d opened an oven door and was breathing in the hot air. Yet I wouldn’t struggle anymore—even though the fire and pain seared through my body. At that moment the building became absolutely quiet to me.”

FROM “REFINED BY FIRE”

First came the explosion, Lieutenant Colonel Brian Birdwell recounts in the opening chapter of his book, “Refined by Fire.” He had never heard anything that loud, despite his 19 years in the Army, including a tour of duty in Iraq and more than a decade as an artillery officer. Then, in an instant, came the darkness. Then, the fire.

At 9:37 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001, in the flash of the moment when an 80-ton airliner crashed into the Pentagon, the epicenter of America’s military became a war zone, and Birdwell was on fire. So intense was the pain, he writes, that he was certain he was about to die, and he was ready to do so.

He thought about his wife and child. He prayed. He could smell the jet fuel. He struggled to what he hoped was safety by moving along a wall, only to find that escape route blocked. The end seemed certain until he was spotted by two fellow officers, one of whom he knew but who didn’t recognize him because of his injuries.

The story of Birdwell’s subsequent recovery is recounted in the book’s narrative. It alternates between segments by Birdwell and his wife and co-author Mel, whose initial segment is a harrowing account of watching televised images of her husband’s office burn but being unable to contact him.

“It’s our book, side-by-side. We did that mainly because of the synchronization of what we were both living with at the same time. While the Lord was caring for me, he was doing the same thing for Mel,” says Birdwell, who spent four months in intensive care recovering from his burns—about 40 percent of them third-degree—over 60 percent of his body.

Birdwell, who leaned on both the discipline of his military training as well as his Christian faith during his recovery, says he was able to recall so many of the details of his treatment and agony because he was not placed in a medically induced coma. “While the coma is beneficial in the moment, not being in one makes your recovery—getting back a greater range of motion—much better. On Sept. 12, they made me stand up and walk around. While it’s tough love and agonizing, it’s better in the long run and allowed me to be in the loop on my treatment, as I was at least somewhat lucid.”

The book is unstinting in its description of Birdwell’s injuries and treatment. In one segment, Mel describes how maggots were used to eat away Brian’s infected tissue when he developed a life-threatening infection. As his condition improved, there were lighter moments—being able to satisfy his craving for Taco Bell and a Coke on his 40th birthday.

“The title resonates because one of two things happen,” says Birdwell. “Either tragedy destroys you or tragedy makes you better. The Lord is the reason why it didn’t destroy our marriage, didn’t destroy our lives.”
Maryland Senator Catherine E. Pugh

“It’s not just about understanding what we must do... It’s doing it with purpose and laboring in truth...
Don’t lead me in darkness while you stand in the light...
And tell me I’m wrong when you’re not doing right...”

FROM THE POEM “PICTURE THIS” IN “MIND GARDEN”

The collection of poetry deals with a range of social issues, and was based on “a number of interactions, thoughts I had in my head, around issues being addressed, such as moving the compulsory school attendance age to 18, about politicians taking their positions seriously, about looking at neighborhoods and knowing what needs to be done about improving their conditions,” she says.

“I called it ‘Mind Garden’ because it’s really about making people think about some of the issues we’re dealing with in our daily lives and the importance of each other as individuals. I thought it was a way to engage with the public.”

She frequently reads one of her poems on parenting during public appearances in front of young audiences. It begins:

“You are my parent ... not my best friend ...
You provide the guidance and the discipline
You love me, care about me, provide for me and guide me ...
You teach me right from wrong.”

She says young people respond to the poem “because they don’t want their parent to treat them as their friend. They want someone who is providing guidance.”

Pugh’s also written a series of “Healthy Holly” children’s books encouraging healthy eating and exercise. “The inspiration came from an NCSL conference on health in Denver where the issue of childhood obesity came up,” says Pugh. “I began to look at those figures and about what we were doing to change that.”


“In many of our schools, the outdoor activities many of us grew up with don’t take place anymore. I’m trying to get children to understand that it really doesn’t take much to be healthy. It can be a walk in the park, a ride on the bike, those little things that don’t cost anything to do.”

The late Governor Mario Cuomo of New York famously observed that politicians campaign in poetry, but govern in prose. Maryland Senator Catherine E. Pugh spans both genres. An accomplished writer and editor, Pugh published “Mind Garden: Where Thoughts Grow” in 2005, the same year she was elected to the Maryland House of Delegates.

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Senator Brian Birdwell was first elected to the Legislature in a special election in 2010. He’s a Republican, a native Texan and holds degrees in criminal justice and public administration. He joined the Army in 1984, and was a military aide at the Pentagon when American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into it on Sept. 11, 2001. Birdwell was thrown from his second floor office to ground level and sustained serious burns over 60 percent of his body. He received the Purple Heart for his wounds and the Legion of Merit award after he retired from the military. He and his wife Mel have formed Face the Fire Ministries, a nonprofit, Christian organization that supports critical burn survivors and wounded service personnel and their families.

Senator Catherine E. Pugh, a Democrat, has represented her Senate district since 2007 and was a member of the House of Delegates for two years before that. She was raised in Philadelphia and has a master’s degree in business administration. She is currently president and CEO of C.E. Pugh and Co., a public relations consulting firm. In January she was a guest of the first lady at the president’s State of the State address, and in February was selected as majority leader of the Maryland Senate and president of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators.

Representative Dwight Evans has served the people of northwest Philadelphia for 18 terms. He’s a Democrat, a Philadelphia native and holds a degree from LaSalle University. He has taught in Philadelphia Public Schools and has been an employment counselor with the Urban League of Philadelphia. In 2004, he spearheaded the successful Fresh Food Financing Initiative that links public and private money to encourage grocery stores to build in underserved, rural, urban and suburban areas. Evans is currently co-chair of NCSL’s Hunger Partnership.

Minnesota Representative Dean Urdahl is a Republican whose ancestors helped to settle Litchfield Township in 1856, near where he lives today. He is a retired American history teacher and coach, and holds a degree in social studies. He is serving his seventh term in the Minnesota House, having first been elected in 2002. He was instrumental in forming the Minnesota Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission. He resides with his wife and editor, Karen, on a hobby farm.

Senator Steve Farley, a Democrat, was first elected to the Arizona House in 2006, then moved to the Senate in 2012. He has a degree in political science, but around his hometown of Tucson, he is known for his art. He invented a way to convert photographs into glazed ceramic tiles that now decorate various highway underpasses in downtown Tucson. One has been named Best Mural in Tucson in a reader poll for 11 years in a row. He has owned his own small business—a public art, photography and graphic design business—since 1991.
Pennsylvania Representative Dwight Evans

“Politics is a contact sport and if you play it long enough, you’re bound to get hit. But despite the hits I’ve taken, I’ve never lost my faith in the process and my optimism for the future. Time and again I’ve seen how a group of active citizens can change the lives of a family and a community.”

FROM “MAKING IDEAS MATTER”

Representative Dwight Evans knew he wanted to write a book that melded public policy with his life story—but he wasn’t sure what to call it. The title, “Making Ideas Matter: My Life as a Policy Entrepreneur” came to him “at the end of the process—after reading it, and going over it, again and again,” he says.

The policy challenge of making ideas matter comes from the power ideas can have, Evans says. “Sometimes, in the political process, people forget what being in the legislature is all about.” At the end of the day, Evans says, the most meaningful, the “aha,” moment for him is taking policy ideas and making them happen, putting them into action.

Written in collaboration with veteran journalist William Ecenbarger, “Making Ideas Matter” touches on Evans’ personal and private life—from being born in a hospital founded by Ben Franklin, to being named after President Dwight Eisenhower.

Doing the book has given Evans “an opportunity to get in a helicopter and rise above the skirmishes that take place. I was in the midst of a lot of political battles,” he says. “Out of 34 years in the legislature, I was on the appropriations committee for 28 years and chairman for 20 years. I’ve seen up close what takes place.”

Evans points to his stewardship of the Fresh Food Financing Initiative in 2004 as an example of “taking an idea, using the state as a laboratory to test it, and now seeing it elevated to national policy in the Farm Bill.”

At last count, the program has encouraged companies to build 85 new grocery stores in areas that are benefiting thousands of families whose previous food choices were unhealthy and overpriced. The initiative also is credited with helping to create more than 5,000 jobs statewide.

“When I look back on it, what I wasn’t able to do before I started writing this book,” says Evans, “was reflect on how things could be done and should be done—to think about things I could have done differently.”

Evans acknowledges that today’s hyper-partisan political environment can be an impediment to making ideas matter.

“I think it’s tougher today because outside events can have such a determining factor, driving your ability to get things done,” he says. Health care, for example, is an area “where there is constant debate, but where issues and events drive the ideas rather than policy,” Evans says. Issues like the Ebola outbreak, terrorism and violence all affect policy, but you don’t know what effect they will have on “either accelerating your idea or stopping your idea,” he says.
Representative Dean Urdahl’s books have plumbed his passion for history through battlefields and baseball diamonds.

His first book, “Touching Bases with Our Memories: The Players Who Made the Minnesota Twins 1961 to 2001,” commemorated the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the Twins and gave him the chance, as a lifelong baseball fan, to relive his formative years.

“It was fun to interview my boyhood hero [Twins slugger and Hall of Famer] Harmon Killebrew and get to meet with him a few times,” says Urdahl. “I would’ve paid to write that book.”

With his wife, Karen, as his editor, Urdahl has been a prolific writer. His books include a novel speculating about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and a nonfiction book on the suspicious death in 2000 of Rev. John Kaiser, a Catholic priest from Minnesota, in Kenya, where he had spent much of his life as a missionary.

But the most frequent focus of his writing comes from growing up in Litchfield, Minn., where his great-great-grandfather buried the remains of the first five settlers killed in the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. Urdahl, a history buff turned high school history teacher, was inspired to write his first novel, “Uprising,” after years of teaching about the six-week conflict that ended with most Dakota people being expelled from the state.

“I’d been teaching and researching it and taking students to places that were in the war, and I decided to put it all down into a story. To me, history is a story, not just straight facts and figures.” Urdahl followed “Uprising” with three more historical novels based on the Civil War and the Dakota War. His latest, “Three Paths to Glory,” was published just last month. Urdahl has found that his dual roles as writer and legislator occasionally intersect.

“I discovered through my research and writing that the [federal] Indian Removal Act of 1863 [which banished the Dakota Indians from Minnesota] was still on the books.” He sponsored a resolution in 2009, which passed unanimously and was signed by the governor, asking Congress to rescind it. Congress has yet to act, Urdahl says, though it is symbolic. Dakotas live on four reservations in the state, “but we did make the statement that in Minnesota, the Dakota people are welcome.”
Arizona Senator Steve Farley

“Underneath the corrugated tin roof of Cairo’s major downtown food market exists a dynamic world of effusive gestures of kindness and love together with churning violence and rivalries, of deep religious beliefs alongside devotion to soccer teams, of coffee shops and iceman, and of many different people from varied backgrounds all brought together to shop, work, eat and sleep…” FROM “TALES FROM THE SUQ”

Senator Steve Farley has worked on a variety of books that involve often-overlooked pieces of Tucson’s past: a history of public housing, photographs of downtown Tucson streets from the 1930s to the 1960s, a series of interviews in which young people asked their elders to describe their experiences in World War II.

But Farley’s newest book ranges far and wide from Tucson.

“Tales from the Suq” is a book of pictures and stories about the people who live and work in Egypt’s disappearing urban marketplaces. It is set in 1983, when Farley was one of a dozen Williams College students who spent a year in Cairo, Egypt.

“I was the only one who lasted the whole year, but I always liked challenging myself,” says Farley. “The book is about the stories I heard and found out in the downtown food market in Cairo. One day after basketball practice I wanted to look for some eggs and started talking to one of the egg sellers. He knew a little English, I knew a little Arabic and we became close friends.

“I used to spend a couple of hours a day hanging out in the marketplace talking to other people, finding out how it works. I became very trusted and took a lot of notes and photographs and always wanted to turn that into a book. This year seemed like an important thing to publish a book which included one about the founding of Rhode Island.

“No one really knows that story. Massachusetts went to war with them and killed a number of their citizens because they didn’t like some of their beliefs.”

He’s got other ideas as well. “I’ve also wanted to do a historical novel about the Civil War.

“My great-great-grandfather was a 13-year-old who lied about his age and wound up in Sherman’s army marching across the South. I’d like to retrace his steps as if the Civil War was happening today.”

And So Many More

We’ve finished perusing the bookstore for now. With the compelling stories these five state lawmakers had to share, we can only assume that many other state legislators—not to mention the nation’s thousands of talented legislative staff—are similarly gifted storytellers and poets.
The Supreme Court heard oral arguments recently in two cases critical to states that challenge the authority of redistricting commissions and the legality of tax credits offered through federally run health insurance exchanges.

**Arizona State Legislature v. Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission**

Even if this case wasn’t the biggest involving legislative authority that the U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to hear in a long time, the oral argument was bound to be interesting.

It featured two well-matched opponents, former Solicitor General Paul Clement, arguing for the Arizona Legislature, and former Solicitor General Seth Waxman, arguing for Arizona’s redistricting commission.

At issue is Arizona’s Proposition 106—a citizen’s initiative passed in 2000 that transferred all federal redistricting authority from the Legislature to an independent commission. The court will decide whether it violates the U.S. Constitution’s Elections Clause that states the “times, places and manner of holding elections for senators and representatives, shall be prescribed in each state by the Legislature thereof.”

This case will be won or lost depending on how the court interprets the phrase “by the legislature thereof.” Does it mean the body of the legislature or legislative power in general?

Although the oral argument is hardly a foolproof indicator of what the court will rule, it appeared that a majority of the justices were leaning in favor of the Arizona Legislature.

Justice Antonin Scalia, noting that legislatures, rather than voters, selected all U.S. senators up until passage of the 17th Amendment in 1913, commented that history “works very much against” the commission’s arguments.

The Supreme Court will decide the case by the end of June.

**King v. Burwell**

For Justice Anthony Kennedy, it was his questions. For Chief Justice John Roberts, it was his silence.

The Supreme Court also heard arguments in the second case to reach the high court on federal health care reform. The justices will decide whether the subsidies offered to middle- and low-income purchasers of insurance through federally run health insurance exchanges are legal. Challengers argue the law’s wording—“established by the state”—limits the tax credits to state-run exchanges, even though the Internal Revenue Service has interpreted the words to include federal exchanges.

All eyes and ears were on Justice Kennedy and Chief Justice Roberts during the argument. Kennedy is the court’s “swing” justice, and Roberts concluded in the first Supreme Court challenge to the federal law that the individual mandate is a constitutional “tax.”

A key moment came when Justice Kennedy, not once but twice, asked Michael Carvin, the challengers’ attorney: Would a “serious constitutional problem” or a “serious constitutional question” arise if the court concluded that federal exchanges could not offer subsidies? He then questioned whether states would be “coerced” into establishing exchanges to “avoid disastrous consequences.”

Kennedy also questioned the wisdom of giving the IRS the huge task of interpreting this statute when billions of dollars are at stake. The federal government’s attorney, Solicitor General Donald Verrilli, responded that when statutes are ambiguous, agencies must interpret them whether they raise questions big or small.

Chief Justice Roberts asked whether a subsequent administration could change an agency interpretation. But none of Roberts’ questions gave listeners a hint at how he’s leaning.

Justice Antonin Scalia asked the solicitor general whether he really believed Congress would do nothing if the court ruled against the federal government. And Justice Alito asked why so few of the 34 states with federal exchanges filed a brief supporting the federal government.

The justices face two difficult tasks: determining the best interpretation of the statute and ascertaining the practical problems that could arise if subsidies weren’t available.

Both sides claim federalism is on their side in this case. The justices will give their opinions by the end of June.
Why can we track a package around the world, but we can’t keep track of our kids in foster care?

“Since I moved around from school district to school district so often, tracking down all of the paperwork was a huge problem. No one knew if I had enough credits to graduate. If I had known, I could have applied to college,” says one former foster youth.

In the information age we live in—where personal data and records are needed to do just about anything—children in foster care without school and medical records can be at a real disadvantage.

Data Disconnect

States use a variety of data collection and sharing systems to track numbers—how many children are entering and exiting foster care, for example. But there are roadblocks along the way that can make it quite difficult to obtain and maintain complete, consistent and specific information about each child.

Child welfare caseworkers typically, but not always, collect health histories, immunization records and school records. In many instances, however, the information is never entered into an electronic database, often because of a chronic lack of time and resources.

Children in foster care move frequently—often for their own safety—but too often, their information doesn’t keep up with them. State and federal laws that require confidentiality of foster children’s records present other special challenges, as does the inconsistency in the kinds of data reported, recorded and managed by all the different agencies involved in a foster child’s life.

Ensuring health records follow children in foster care as they move through the system is critical to their well-being. Because they often have complex behavioral and mental health care needs, the lack of records can have serious consequences, like an over-prescription of psychotropic medications or duplicate immunizations, for example.

This lack of consistent, complete information can lead to misunderstandings and can potentially harm children in foster care in the long term.

Current Systems

The system currently used by most states is the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System, which is used to collect statewide information on children in foster care. (The rest of the states use a similar system.) This information is reported to the federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, which then provides the national picture on children entering and exiting foster care.

Meghan McCann is an NCSL policy specialist who focuses on foster care issues.

What Is the Role of the Legislature?

State legislators already study child welfare data to make policy decisions. But they can also play an important role in promoting more consistent collection and sharing of child welfare information, defining what type of information is collected and deciding who will have access to the data.

Last year, for example, Delaware lawmakers created a Child Welfare Data Sharing Task Force to make recommendations for data-sharing among the Family Court, the Department of Education, and the Department of Services for Children, Youth and Their Families.

To do this, the task force will:
- Define what specific data are to be shared among the agencies and Family Court.
- Identify any potential legal obstacles.
- Develop regulatory requirements and security parameters.
- Calculate the potential costs.
- Determine the feasibility and cost of developing a student ID for every child born in the state.

State lawmakers can consider providing specific health and education information for each child. They may also facilitate the coordination of physical, dental and mental health services and care provided to children in custody.
exiting foster care.

The Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System was designed to provide comprehensive statewide information required by the federal government. It provides information on entries and exits into and out of foster care and the number of placements per child. But it doesn’t include information about children’s education, health care and other day-to-day information used by caseworkers, teachers, doctors or foster parents in making decisions regarding the child.

Although these systems work well providing the big picture, they are not designed to provide individualized data to those making important decisions on the fates of specific children in foster care.

**Alternative Data Systems**

Although alternative systems to the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System are rare, Indiana recently adapted a new Internet-based case management tool called Casebook. It was developed by CaseCommons and the Annie E. Casey Foundation and funded through a federal waiver to use federal foster care funds to test modern child welfare technology.

The state hopes the new system, by providing real-time, specific data, will help child welfare caseworkers and other decision makers make better informed decisions on behalf of foster children.

And good decisions are exactly what many of these children are seeking. Good decisions and a chance to start afresh.

**Backpacks and Passports**

To ensure children don’t lose their vital personal information while in the foster care system, a couple of states are looking at electronic backpacks or passports. This innovative idea was developed recently at the county level as a way to use current technology to be sure the information collected on children travels with them throughout their journey through foster care.

The information collected and kept in the “ebackpacks” is not to be reported as part of federal requirements. Its sole purpose is to provide the most current information on the child to caseworkers and decision makers.

In Ventura County, Calif., an electronic backpack program begins this year with medical records and will phase in other child-specific information gradually. The backpack will be available for children to take with them as they leave foster care to help with college and job applications.

Kansas, Tennessee and Texas are using electronic health passports in a similar way. They provide a Web-based program that contains health information from several sources to prevent duplicate immunizations and over-prescriptions. These passports can include other information as well, such as education records.

**In Search of a Better Way**

State legislators are discussing the best way to improve the data collection system.

Vermont lawmakers, for example, created the Joint Legislative Committee on Child Protection in 2014 in order to “investigate and evaluate Vermont’s current system of child protection for the purpose of protecting children from abuse and neglect.” One area that was addressed was sharing information on children and families in the child welfare system.

Senator Claire Ayer (D) who chairs the Vermont Committee on Child Protection, says the committee learned that the various confidentiality requirements were keeping important information from reaching those who needed it. “The committee’s ultimate question,” she says, became, “Are these confidentiality rules actually protecting the child?”

Committee members learned that foster parents, teachers, caregivers, guardians and other people who knew the child felt no one was listening to them about the child’s issues. And finally, the committee discovered that “mandatory reporters were concerned about what was happening to children that they were reporting. But they were never told what happened to those children,” says Ayer.

From this committee came Senate Bill 9, which among other things, seeks to foster better communication among all participants in the child protection system by giving health care providers, educators, foster parents and others access to a child’s records.

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**The Confidentiality Conundrum**

As children move from placement to placement in foster care, it is often difficult to gather data in time to move with them. State and federal confidentiality laws limit who can see the data and whom it can be shared with, making it difficult for those trying to keep foster kids’ information comprehensive, complete and current.

Two federal laws present the greatest challenges: the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. The first requires confidentiality of child abuse and neglect records, while the second requires health records to be kept strictly confidential, especially patients’ personal identifying information. CAPTA requires that states must preserve the confidentiality of all child abuse and neglect reports and records to protect the privacy rights of the child and of the child’s parents or guardians. Most states statutorily permit certain persons access to the information, such as those with a direct interest in the case, in the child’s welfare or in providing child protection or treatment services.

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**Foster Children By The Numbers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children in foster care</td>
<td>402,378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children who entered and exited foster care in 2013</td>
<td>254,904 and 238,280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of a child in foster care</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The average number of months children stay in foster care</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portion of foster children with two or fewer placements who were in care between 12 and 24 months (37% had three or more placements)</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2012–2013*
The level of civics knowledge among most Americans is nothing to write home about.

BY JANE HOBACK

All it civics literacy, or perhaps more accurately, civics illiteracy. Survey after survey shows that Americans’ knowledge of how their government works is at an alarming low. And educators and legislators alike point to what they see as a primary reason: a big gap in civics classes in public schools.

“The whole concept behind having public schools in the first place was to teach civics so we would have good citizens,” says Florida Representative Charles McBurney (R). “A student may be great at Shakespeare or a math whiz, but if students don’t understand our republic and how our government works and we lose our republic as a result, all the rest of their education won’t do us any good.”

State legislators like McBurney, along with organizations dedicated to civics education, are joining forces to turn the tide. They hope to expand civics engagement among young people to increase voter turnout as well as community involvement and participation in all levels of government. And their efforts encompass a range of viewpoints about how to teach civics and make it relevant in the 21st century.

Arizona is the first state to require high school seniors to pass a civics test to graduate, starting in 2017. The test, the same one immigrants take when seeking citizenship, asks questions such as “What are the two parts of the U.S. Congress?” Students must correctly answer 60 of the 100 questions. The fast-moving bill left committee, passed both chambers and was signed by Governor Doug Ducey (R) in one day. Supporters said it will help ensure an informed citizenry; critics said it is a waste of time and money and burdens schools with an additional test.

“I’ve read that anything of real value is worth appropriately measuring,” Senator Steve Yarbrough (R) told The Arizona Republic. “I would submit that a minimal understanding of American civics is of real value and therefore worthy of measurement.”

What They Don’t Know

The recent spotlight on civics education is due in part to retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, who pointed to results of surveys by the Annenberg Public Policy Center as well as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the nation’s report card, administered by the U.S. Department of Education.

The oft-quoted 2011 Annenberg surveys showed that more respondents (two-thirds) knew the name of at least one of the judges on “American Idol” than the name of the chief justice of the Supreme Court (15 percent) or the three branches of government (one-third).

Students who took the nation’s report card civics test in 2011 did poorly as well. Only 27 percent of fourth-graders, 22 percent of eighth-graders and 24 percent of 12th-graders scored proficient or higher in civics on questions involving such topics as the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, the Supreme Court and the three branches of government.

The results follow a decades-long downward trend, according to Peter Levine, director of Tufts University’s Center for Information and Research on Civics Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE).

“All evidence is that [civics knowledge] is weaker than it was 30 years ago,” Levine says.

Calling the state of civics education a “crisis,” O’Connor founded icivics.org, a nonprofit group that teaches civics through Web-based games and other resources available to students, teachers and schools. And she continues to travel across the country speaking on the topic.

Educators and others say the decline is due in part to a lack of emphasis on civics classes in favor of math and reading.

“Arguably, one of the greatest factors undermining high-quality civics education in schools today are the requirements of state assessments and the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which largely ignore the civics mission of schools in favor of concentrating on math and reading,” according to Silver Spring, Md.-based Campaign for the Civics Mission of Schools.

The campaign works to expand civics learning in schools and in 2011 issued its updated Guardian of Democracy report, which outlines the challenges facing civics learning.
and makes recommendations for effective education practices.

A 2010 survey of civics and social studies teachers reported that 45 percent of the respondents say social studies curriculum at their high school had been de-emphasized, and 70 percent say social studies classes are a lower priority because of pressure to show progress on statewide math and language arts tests.

The Calabasas, Calif.-based Center for Civics Education, which was established to provide free K-12 curriculum and programs on the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and other related topics to public schools, had been funded by the U.S. Department of Education since 1986. It served about 3 million students a year and had coordinators in every state. But Congress cut off the center’s $26.5 million in funds in 2011.

“That was nearly all the money the federal government put into civics education,” says Charles Quigley, the center's executive director. “The Department of Education takes no leadership, and Congress won’t put funding into these programs.”

While the center has had to cut back, it’s looking for new sources of funding and is encouraging its coordinators to work with their respective state legislatures, Quigley says.

Making a Comeback?

Some states already have instituted major new legislation requiring civics education and some form of accountability. Others have mandated task forces to study the issue. The efforts encompass a variety of approaches to standards, mandates, testing and assessment, and professional development.

Nearly all states require at least one civics class. Some have state-designed social studies tests, and a few require students to pass a social studies test to graduate from high school. A handful of states have tests specifically in civics and American government, according to CIRCLE.

“Most states actually do have requirements for civics,” says CIRCLE’s Levine. “But it’s probably too little and it’s probably not effective enough. Not every state has standards for civics.”

The Denver-based National Center for Learning and Civics Engagement has sorted the different efforts by states into what Director Paul Baumann calls “buckets” of approaches.

“We’re starting to see recommendations taken up on various levels: mandated task forces, mandated assessments, statewide initiatives, some administrative directives from governors and even, surprisingly enough, the judiciary branch,” Baumann says. “I think—I hope—we may be on the cusp of a resurgence of interest in students becoming better civics actors.”

—PAUL BAUMANN, DIRECTOR AT THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR LEARNING AND CIVICS ENGAGEMENT

Encouraging the Young to Vote

Last November, 16- and 17-year-olds in Takoma Park, Md., voted in the city’s municipal elections, making the community the nation’s first to lower the voting age from 18 to 16.

Last May, Louisiana became the first state in the country to automatically pre-register 16-year-olds to vote when they apply for their driver’s license.

The changes are among efforts by state and local governments and voting organizations to encourage young people to go to the polls and establish lifelong habits of voting.

“The earlier you vote, the more likely you are to become a habitual voter, and you can often have the biggest impact at the local level,” says Patricia Hart, project director of Promote Our Vote at FairVote.

FairVote, which is based in Takoma Park, helped lead the effort to lower the voting age in municipal elections.

The nonprofit group also promotes lowering the age for pre-registration.

A handful of states allow eligible voters to pre-register to vote at age 16, while at least nine states allow pre-registration at age 17. Still more states allow teens to register if they will be 18 before the next election.

And about 20 states allow 17-year-olds to vote in primaries if they will be 18 at the time of the corresponding general election.

Louisiana lowered the age to be able to pre-register to vote from 17 to 16 when teens apply for their driver’s license. It also is unique in the United States because it requires the Office of Motor Vehicles to register 16- and 17-year-olds to vote unless they explicitly decline.

“It’s basically an opt-out system,” Hart says. “It’s a great policy that really helps keep their rolls updated and gets young people involved early.”

Whatever the approach, Baumann, along with many of his peers, sees three necessary elements:

A Trio of Standouts

Civics education leaders point to three states that have passed innovative legislation in civics learning, each with a different approach.

In Tennessee, legislators passed a bill in 2012 mandating project-based civics assessments in middle school and high school, the first of its kind in the country. The projects are designed to show a student’s mastery of content that includes public policy; the U.S. and Tennessee constitutions; and the structure of federal, state and local governments.

“There is a lack of fundamental
ultimately persuaded the board of education and strategic advice to the educators, who implement an action plan. They must select a problem to research and create and government and other civics topics. They must requires that students understand the U.S. law requiring a high school civics course. The course, "Participation in Democracy," joined forces to defeat a proposal by the lesson of their own in civics when they see this as survival of the republic." Norris says, "Not to sound melodramatic," Norris says, "but to vote unanimously against the repeal. "I was surprised that teachers who teach civics were not very knowledgeable about how to take action. They teach civics from an academic standpoint," Ihara says. "This was a very constructive exercise for them. Civics should teach people how to participate in policymaking from neighborhoods to local government to state and federal government.”

The Florida Legislature passed the Justice Sandra Day O’Connor Civics Education Act in 2010 requiring middle-school students to pass a semester-long civics class test before they can be promoted to high school. In 2013, the Legislature changed the law to require only that the test would account for 30 percent of the student’s final grade.

The course covers branches of government, political processes and key documents including the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The law also requires that the reading curriculum in every grade level contain civics education materials.

McBurney says he was disappointed that the bill was watered down. "I think we need to know that students know the subject matter," he says. "But I’m glad it’s still 30 percent of the student’s final grade.”

Even more important than the final grade for McBurney, however, is the hope that civics knowledge will translate into civics engagement. "Not just voting," he says. "But once they understand how things work, the goal is that they participate in the process, engage in civics activities.’ Civics engagement is what inspired Hawaii’s Ihara to organize a legislative intern program. Students are attached to specific legislators and learn firsthand how state laws are made.

“You don’t have a lot of youth interested in legislation,” Ihara says. “This is a way to incorporate their voices.”

All Play a Role

CIRCLE’s Levine also argues that responsibility for civics learning should not be restricted to schools, which in fact may not even be the best way to attract young people’s interest. Newspapers, nonprofit and volunteer organizations, families, social media and the Internet all have a role.

It might be too early to tell if these renewed efforts at civics learning are paying off. Youth voting trends continue to be at least one concrete measure of engagement. And the trends show that the number of young people who vote has remained fairly static.

CIRCLE reports that 45 percent of all those eligible to vote between the ages of 18 and 29 voted in the 2012 presidential election, down from 51 percent in 2008. Voters in that age group represented about 19 percent of all voters.

Still, CIRCLE and other groups say that civics education increases the likelihood that young people will vote. In addition, once they register and go to the polls the first time, they are more likely to vote in subsequent elections.

Says Florida’s McBurney: "If you want young people to be engaged, you have to hit them early.”
Are you smarter than a fifth-grader? What about a high school senior? Arizona will require high school seniors to pass a citizenship test in order to graduate, starting in 2017. Would your constituents pass? Take this quiz. The first four questions are from the U.S. citizenship study guide. The rest come from NCSL experts and are designed for our members, who know a thing or two about government.

1. Under the U.S. Constitution, some powers belong to the states. What is one power of the states?
A. Make treaties  
B. Create an army  
C. Provide schooling and education  
D. Mint coins or print money

2. How many justices are on the U.S. Supreme Court?
A. 9  
B. 10  
C. 11  
D. 12

3. Who was president during the Great Depression and World War II?
A. Franklin Roosevelt  
B. Harry Truman  
C. Calvin Coolidge  
D. Herbert Hoover

4. The Federalist Papers supported the passage of the U.S. Constitution. Name one of the writers.
A. John Adams  
B. George Washington  
C. James Madison  
D. Thomas Jefferson

5. Which of the following statements about separation of powers is not true?
A. Separation of powers refers to the division of government responsibilities.  
B. An absolute separation of powers exists within every democratic system.  
C. Separation of powers inhibits the concentration of power.  
D. Separation of power encourages cooperation among the branches of government.

6. With only one exception among the states, who ultimately determines if a state constitutional amendment is adopted?
A. The governor  
B. The state legislature  
C. A vote of the people  
D. The State Supreme Court  
(Bonus: Which state is the exception?)

7. Which of the following is not true about veto powers?
A. The definition of veto is the power or right given to one branch of government to stop an action of another branch.  
B. Congress and all state legislatures have the power to overturn a veto by the chief executive (president or governor).  
C. Most governors have the power to veto individual items or words contained in laws passed by the legislature.  
D. The president has the power to veto individual items or words contained in laws passed by Congress.

8. Which of the following is false?
A. Each state has its own constitution.  
B. The federal constitution takes precedence over state constitutions when there are conflicts.  
C. Most state constitutions are shorter than the federal constitution.  
D. Some state constitutions can be changed by the initiative and referendum process.

EXTRA CREDIT: True or False

9. Each county in a state has the same number of state senators, regardless of size.
T  
F

10. Local governments (cities, counties, towns) typically have no powers beyond those granted to them from their state constitution or state legislature.
T  
F

11. All state senators serve six-year terms.
T  
F

12. In addition to the 50 states and the District of Columbia, five commonwealths or territories make up the United States.
T  
F
General Wesley Clark, former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO forces in Europe, is currently the chairman and CEO of Wesley K. Clark and Associates, a strategic consulting firm, and co-chairman of Growth Energy. NCSL’s Mark Wolf spoke with him after his keynote address on energy and security at NCSL’s Legislative Summit.

State Legislatures: How do you define leadership?

Wesley Clark: A good leader always has a plan. He’s trying to accomplish something. What’s common to all leaders is the ability to plan ahead and the ability to mobilize people, to inspire them to get the job done. Eisenhower gave us a definition when he came back from World War II that all cadets had to memorize. It’s always been my definition of what leadership is. He said, “Leadership is the ability to get the other fellow to want to do what you want him to do.” That’s leadership.

What are the most critical issues facing the United States in terms of energy and energy security?

Energy security is about more than just energy independence. It’s about supply and price. The whole world is hungry for American resources: gas, diesel, biofuels. All of it can be exported to an energy-starving world. So supply is No. 1.

And price is No. 2. If we can put enough supply out there, we’ll control the price, and controlling the price keeps those resources here at home.

What do you mean when you say that energy security is the saving strategy for the United States?

Energy is going to give us a chance to jump-start the economy again. If you look across America, people are struggling. We can restart America’s economic growth if we’ll focus on the extraction of liquid hydrocarbons and biofuels, which will help us become energy independent. Then we can use those resources to deal with all our other problems: infrastructure and education, manufacturing and space, to rebuild our economy.

What would you like state lawmakers to be thinking about when they are shaping state energy policy?

I’d like to see them expedite the permitting process so we can produce more hydrocarbons. I’d like to see them tightening the environmental restraints so we do it more responsibly. And I’d like to see them advocating in Washington for the complete package: more hydrocarbons and greater environmental protection, including a carbon tax, started small. We need to plant the flag so America has a future that’s less carbon-intensive.

Where are we now compared to when you started writing about energy policy in 1973?

In 1973, prices began to explode because the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, an organization we had basically acquiesced to, was allowed to dominate world oil markets. As we imported more oil, they raised their prices on us. We recognized it was a strategic problem.

Every major recession since the 1970s was preceded by a rise in the price of oil. So it’s been a steady ratcheting up of the price of oil, gouging the rest of the world, and impoverishing hundreds of millions of people in developing countries that don’t have oil. That’s
“Energy security is about more than just energy independence. It’s about controlling the price, keeping those resources here at home.”

What’s the military’s role in reducing our energy and climate risks?

The military is the largest energy consumer in the federal government, so whether it’s electricity and how we generate it, or the consumption of liquid fuels, the military takes a leading role as the pathbreaker. It can put solar and wind on military installations and push to have biofuels as a backup.

The Air Force and Navy have done that for jet engines and for ships, and the Army has done it at its locations, putting solar power on various military bases. The military sets the standards, they buy in volume, they try to drive the price down. They give young companies a chance to try out their products on them first before competing in the broader commercial market.

How do world events and crises in Washington affect our long-term energy independence?

What’s important are the long-term challenges, like terrorism, cyber insecurity, financial system instability, climate change and bringing China into the international system the right way. These challenges have an effect on our long-term well-being.

They also have some things in common: None of them can be dealt with inside U.S. borders; all involve other countries. And, they can’t be dealt with by simply turning them over to the private sector. We have to use government and the private sector together.

There’s no magic technology that is going to solve these challenges. They are larger problems that will extend longer than any person’s time in office. These are challenges we need to pull America together to face.

How confident are you that we can deal with all of this?

We’ve got to believe in this country. If we can’t, who’s going to?

Editor’s note: This interview is part of a series of conversations with national leaders. It has been edited for length and clarity. The opinions are the interviewee’s and not necessarily NCSL’s.
Google, Apple and Microsoft aren’t the only ones who can think outside the box. At least seven state legislatures debuted a whole new look for their legislative websites in 2015, and many others are adding great new features for legislators, legislative staff and citizens. All make it easier to find information, interact with legislators, and participate in and follow the legislative process.

This subjective review of some of the newest features of legislative websites spotlights 15 must- steal ideas from 2015, but don’t stop with these. Visit other legislative websites for a virtual tour of our representative democracy.

Some of these ideas may appear easy to copy, but don’t try this at home! First, consult with your legislative information technology staff about the kinds of skills, time and money it would take to adapt these ideas to your state. Just because they seem easy, doesn’t mean they are.

And for all the geniuses behind these 15 ideas, congratulations, job well done. We admire you. And remember, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

1. **South Carolina**

   **Dashboards to Multi-Task**

   In technological terms, a computer dashboard, like a car’s, displays constantly updated information in an easy-to-view format, allowing you to keep track of several different key indicators at once. South Carolina’s legislative dashboards for the House and Senate show the current bill or amendment under consideration, the calendar, the journal and the meeting schedule for the week. View these in up to six panels on your screen, or close one or more of the ones you don’t need to track. Expand the panel to view the bill, amendment or other information in full screen. And for those who need it, an accompanying “how to” video demonstrates the use of the dashboard.

2. **Iowa**

   **Who’s Watching?**

   Have you ever wondered how many people really watch legislative proceedings that are streamed on the Web? The Iowa House no longer has to wonder—it knows. Iowa’s legislative website features viewership reports by week, displayed in a bar chart format. The House, for example, had close to 300 people viewing proceedings on Jan. 4, 2015. This helps in knowing what issues are drawing citizens’ attention.

3. **Ohio**

   **An Eye on Rulemaking**

   RuleWatch Ohio gives citizens an easy way to keep track of proposed rules and regulations.

4. **Pennsylvania**

   **What’s Popular?**

   It’s easy to find the bills or topics most in demand on the Pennsylvania General Assembly website. A tab at the top of the legislature’s home page lists the “Most Popular Pages”—the top-viewed bills over the past seven days and 30 days, and the most popular webpages within the site in the same time periods. The “Find Your Legislator” tool is one of the most popular features on the site. Wait, is that two great ideas in one?

5. **Virginia**

   **Tracking IT**

   Virginia’s Division of Legislative Automated Systems has a webpage that describes information technology projects the division plans or has underway. Its current projects, for example, include a Disaster Recovery and Cloud Computing plan and a Budget Amendment System. The site also offers basic tips and tricks and security guidance that should be helpful to anyone.

6. **Indiana**

   **Eye for Pies**

   In Indiana, you can see which issues dominate legislative sessions in terms of the number Senior Fellow Pam Greenberg visits legislative websites almost daily while doing research for NCSL.
of bills filed. The General Assembly’s “Top Legislative Subjects” webpage produces a pie chart that displays the distribution of bills filed during session by legislative subject matter. (Bills from only the top six categories are represented.) Click on a wedge to pull up links to the bills in each category.

7. Minnesota  
It’s Authentic
The Minnesota Revisor’s Office provides authenticated copies of legislative documents that are considered official electronic records under the Minnesota Uniform Electronic Legal Material Act. All material viewed on the Minnesota Office of the Revisor’s website is sent through secure servers with encryption. The site gives instructions about how to obtain an official record or verify the authenticity of a session law, statute or administrative rule.

8. California  
Compare and Contrast
This feature on the California Legislature’s website makes it easy to identify and compare the changes between two versions of a bill. After selecting a bill, all you have to do is click on “Compare Versions” and select the version you wish to compare. The system displays the changes between the two bill versions. Added text is displayed in blue italics, and deletions are displayed in red strikeout. Utah also offers a way to compare different versions of bills on its website.

9. Missouri  
Keep it Simple
Finding current and past versions of statutes in Missouri is made easy with this redesigned website. Colored “Next Section” and “Previous Section” buttons allow for easy navigating through code sections, and a single click on a date will display prior (now amended) versions of the section text below the current version. Search within the displayed page, and the resulting search terms are highlighted. Familiar envelope and printer icons make it easy to email or print the displayed page.

10. Connecticut  
Quick and Customized
The Connecticut General Assembly’s brand new website has lots of great features. One is a bill search tab that appears at the bottom middle of each webpage. Click on it, and up comes a small box for a quick bill search. Another feature is the General Assembly’s schedule of events, which you can customize to view by month, week or day; print a formatted copy; or add an event reminder to your Outlook, Google, iCal or Yahoo calendar application.
Online Accolades

NCSL has been rewarding great state legislative websites for 10 years through its Online Democracy Award. It is given each year to a legislature, legislative chamber or caucus whose website helps make democracy more user-friendly.

Sponsored by NCSL's Legislative Information and Communications Staff Section and National Association of Legislative Information Technology, the award recipients are announced every summer at the Legislative Summit.

Winners are chosen based on the website’s design, content and use of technology. Judges (legislative staff from states that have previously won the award) ask questions like: Is the site easy to navigate, simple to understand and user-friendly? Does it make finding legislative bills, state statutes and the state constitution simple? Are citizens offered an easy way to identify and communicate with their legislators? Does the site give legislators the opportunity to share their message with citizens and the media? Does the site load quickly and efficiently? Is it highly searchable? Does the site reflect an effort to be accessible to all types of users? Will your website be the next winner?

To find out more and discover who the past winners are, go to www.ncsl.org/magazine.

11. Oregon
Help and How-to’s for Citizens

Integrated throughout the Oregon Legislative Assembly website are clearly explained answers to frequently asked questions about the legislative process or how to use the website. Read about how to testify to a committee and how to submit exhibits, and then watch a video that walks you through the process. Learn how to use the audio and video on the website, including how to use a trimming tool to create a clip from the recording to embed in another website, how to share a link to recordings to a social media site or email, and answers to other FAQs. While you’re there, view other information videos on the site or on the legislature’s YouTube channel.

12. Indiana and Texas
Open Data

An increasing number of state legislatures are offering bill information in standardized and open, nonproprietary electronic formats so that anyone can download the data in bulk to analyze or republish. Indiana and Texas provide detailed information on their legislative websites explaining acceptable uses, file structure, availability and other technical information.

13. Virginia
Meetings Made Easy

The Virginia House of Delegates’ House Meeting Schedule webpage offers a real-time schedule of all House meetings that can be filtered by committees, subcommittees date or other criteria. Like Connecticut’s website, it includes a one-click “Add to Calendar” icon that will save the meeting on your personal electronic calendar.
14. Vermont
Search and Rescue
Vermont’s new website has a couple of slick ways to search for bills, acts and resolutions. You can search for a single bill without guessing how to enter it, since examples of formats are front and center. Or, from the left column of the search page, select all bills, all House or Senate bills, bills passed or vetoed, and so forth, and then refine those results by entering specific terms in a search box. View, print or export your search results to a spreadsheet file.

15. Iowa
Map of the Week
Geographic information system experts produce a map each week for the Iowa General Assembly that displays statistical data on issues important to Iowans. Examples include property tax rates, licensed Iowa breweries, violent crime rates, an interactive map of Iowa legislative districts and earned income tax credits by school district. The legislature’s website also includes a “Map Gallery” with links to interactive mapping applications. A link to the map of the week is tweeted out on the Legislative Service Agency’s Twitter feed.

There you have it: Fifteen innovative IT ideas from 2015. All are worth bringing home to your state. If you don’t, someone else will.

More Americans turn to doctors of optometry than any other eye care professional. With a four-year, doctoral-level clinical degree following college and extensive training, optometrists are licensed to correct vision, but they also diagnose and treat eye diseases. And as the need for new advancements in eye care continue, count on optometrists to offer the most comprehensive eye care.

Learn more at AmericasEyeDoctors.org

Find links to all these new features on state websites in the online State Legislature magazine at www.ncsl.org/magazine.
By now, most legislatures are deep into their session calendars, with lawmakers busy debating, discussing and deliberating the dilemmas facing their states. Many may be feeling stressed, even exhausted. At times like these, every lawmaker needs a survival kit, one that contains all the things helpful to having a successful, stress-free, legislative session. With these legislative staples in your bag of tricks, you’ll not only survive, you’ll thrive.

NCSL can provide you with half of these, for the rest, you’re on your own!

**State Legislatures Magazine**

If you’re reading this, your survival kit has a good start, with the magazine of state policy and politics read by legislators all around the country. Enjoy it, knowing you’re in good company.

**Media Tips**

You can never have too many friends in the media, but you can have too many opinions about how to deal with them. These tips will tell you what works best, plain and simple.

**A Guide to Government Acronyms**

Are you filled to the brim with too much alphabet soup to digest? Use this handy guide to decipher what your colleagues are talking about.

**Mason’s Manual**

To be successful at the game of lawmaking, you have to learn the rules. Mason’s Manual contains all the parliamentary rules and procedures you will ever need to know and use. Be sure to get your own copy.
With the right tools every lawmaker can be effective.

NCSL’s 50-State Bill Information Service
The ability to search bills all across the nation can improve your expertise and inform your decision making in any policy area.

Airline Tickets To Seattle
Want more perspectives? Ideas that work? Training that helps? Tips to bring home? Time with colleagues from others states? Then come to Seattle, Aug. 3–6, for NCSL’s 42nd Legislative Summit.

15 Tips
For those who are losing their focus, forgetting why they ever ran for public office to begin with, this booklet’s sage advice will come in handy. Slip it in anywhere, it takes up very little space.

Your State Budget and State Statutes
Yep, these are essential. Be sure you have easy access to them.

Smart Phone
This ultimate multitasker is quickly becoming an essential. Calculator, calendar, alarm, reminder, ruler, magnifying glass, flashlight, camera, email box, dictionary, recorder, map, translator and so much more, all in one place, all of the time. Don’t leave home without it!

Lucky Rabbit’s Foot & Magic Eight Ball
Everyone could use a little foresight and luck once in a while. Hide them in the bottom of your bag if you must, no one needs to know they’re there.
State Liaisons
YOUR PERSONAL CONNECTION TO NCSL

Turn to your NCSL state liaison for the information and services you need to do your job. All staff can be reached by e-mail at firstname.lastname@ncsl.org.

DENVER CONTACTS (303) 364-7700  WASHINGTON, D.C. CONTACTS (202) 624-5400

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New York Neal Osten  Oregon Sunny Deye
Ethics scandals make news, big news. And they stoke cynicism and distrust among citizens in our representative democracy. So in 1999, when NCSL decided to create its Center for Ethics in Government, Peggy Kerns became its first director, and made the Center one of the most respected ethics training programs in the nation. Today it’s the only source of comprehensive information about ethics laws. A legislative leader herself, Peggy’s political career included two terms on a city council, eight years in the Colorado House, and a position as deputy assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Education. Among many other accolades, she was named Colorado Legislator of the Year by the Associated Press. Along the way she completed a master’s in public administration. After 16 years, Peggy is stepping down, respected and acknowledged as one of the country’s leading voices on ethics.

How do you rate the public’s trust of politicians in 2015? Public trust has been low ever since I took the job. The problem with public perception of politicians is that it’s distorted. Usually, members of the public like their own legislators because they know them. It’s “everyone else” they don’t trust. I don’t know how to solve that. It worries me because I grew up in an era when public service was revered and respected. To think otherwise undermines the incentive for young people to aspire to what I aspired to, which was to serve the public. I think the proliferation of news sources feeds into that. We are bombarded by negativism. When there’s distrust and skepticism, it weakens our form of government. There’s a real danger there.

How has your experience as a legislator influenced your work directing an ethics center? I’ve been there and seen how laws work, or don’t work, and I understand how people have ethical standards and follow them, or sometimes don’t. One of the strengths of our Ethics Center is that we take a practical look at a very lofty topic like ethics and apply it to the real world. We do value-based training, helping legislators and legislative staff understand how to make decisions based on their own ethical standards.

What have you learned about the nature of ethics in public service? I know that lawmakers and staff on the whole are good ethical people who want to do the right thing. In ethics training I try to help people understand there are gray areas, what we call right vs. right. The question becomes, what’s right for you and meets your ethical standards?

What advice do you give newly elected legislators? Know who you are and what you stand for, and have the courage to follow your own ethical standards. The legislature is a fast-paced environment, and decisions have to be made quickly. The pressures can chip away at some of your ethics—don’t let that happen.

You’ve been traveling the country for 16 years talking about ethics. What’s been the most interesting part of your job? Studying whether there is a correlation between weak ethics laws and scandals. I don’t know the answer to that. What I’ve learned is that there is a definite correlation between a strong legislative ethical culture and ethical lawmakers.

Who inspires you? The late Rushworth Kidder, founder and CEO of the Institute for Global Ethics. One of the takeaways in his book, “How Good People Make Tough Choices,” is, again, this gray area. When you obey laws, you’re acting legally, but your ethical standards may be higher than the law. So you may be acting legally, but not ethically, based on your standards.

Which book is currently on your nightstand? “Deep Down Dark,” by Hector Tobar. It’s about the 33 Chilean miners who were trapped in 2010. Even though I know how it ends, it’s suspenseful. I’m also reading “Citizens of London: The Americans who Stood with Britain in its Darkest, Finest Hour,” by Lynne Olson.

You’re a baseball fan. Have you ever hit it out of the park? When my late husband Pat, who was always my top supporter, became ill, we wanted to take some trips. No. 1 on our list was the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. An NCSL colleague just happened to be friends with the Hall of Fame’s president, who set us up with a behind-the-scenes tour and treated us like baseball royalty. Pat talked about that trip for a long time. It was very meaningful.

What would people be surprised to know about you? I wanted to be a musical comedy star on Broadway. That was my aspiration as a child. My 7-year-old granddaughter has the same goal.

What are your plans moving forward? To catch up to myself. For years, my professional and personal lives have been a whirlwind. It’s time to take a breath. Which doesn’t mean I’m going to clean my closets or my basement! I’ve always had an interest in family literacy, so I may pursue activities in this area.
SEE YOU IN

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Register now   www.ncsl.org/summit