

## Sen. Murkowski wary of Parnell's school vouchers proposal

Jeff Richardson/jrichardson@newsminer.com | Posted: Sunday, January 26, 2014 12:00 am

FAIRBANKS — Sen. Lisa Murkowski sees things she likes in a proposed overhaul of Alaska's education system but said a plan to offer vouchers to private schools isn't among them.

Murkowski, who spoke at a News-Miner editorial board meeting Friday, said she's wary of legislation to change the state constitution to allow public funds to go to private schools. Gov. Sean Parnell is touting the voucher proposal as part of a package of reforms to overhaul education in Alaska.

Murkowski — who, like Parnell, is a Republican — said she's a “very, very strong advocate” of the government's responsibility to provide a free public education. She's wary of a plan that could redirect funding outside of that system.

“I have always had great anxiety with the thought that we'd take public money, state money, and send it to private schools,” Murkowski said.

Parnell said he supports the Mat-Su lawmaker-backed Senate Joint Resolution 9, which would put a constitutional amendment allowing vouchers on the ballot. The shape of the voucher program would be up to a future Legislature if the amendment is approved.

Parnell said he supports vouchers as part of his sweeping education reform plan that increases school choice but said the fate of the omnibus education bill he introduced Friday isn't linked to SJR 9.

Murkowski said she believes the government should first focus on making the public school system as good as possible. Sending resources to the private sector could ensure that “mediocre schools” become inevitable in the public system, she said.

Murkowski has had experience with the issue as a student, parent and lawmaker.

She graduated from Monroe Catholic High School, and her sons are products of private schools in Washington, D.C. She had good memories of their public school experience in Anchorage, however, which included the opportunity to attend a Spanish immersion program.

She said flexibility was a benefit and was pleased Parnell's plan appears to include more options for parents.

While she hasn't studied the governor's proposal extensively, she did recognize some appealing elements, Murkowski said. Greater opportunities for students to attend charter schools and regional boarding schools seem like good options, she said.

She said the voucher concept briefly emerged as an issue when she was in the Legislature in the mid-1990s but said there wasn't enough support for it to proceed.

Contact staff writer Jeff Richardson at 459-7518. Follow him on Twitter: @FDNMbusiness.