

**Colleen Ingman**

**From:** Rep. Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins <Rep.Jonathan.Kreiss-Tomkins@akleg.gov>  
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**To:** Rep. Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins  
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## **The Curious Case of Senate Joint Resolution 9**

In politics, education is an issue all its own. It's not Democrats vs. Republicans, dogs vs. cats, Sharks vs. Jets, pro-life vs. pro-choice, pro-"More Alaska Production Act" vs. anti-"Oil Tax Giveaway."

### **Kumbaya**

If most politics are cast in black and white, education politics are wonderfully, perplexingly gray.

As you, dear reader, surely know, I am a skeptic of Governor Parnell's tax cut for oil companies (SB 21). But his education bill (HB 278)? Well, education politics makes strange bedfellows!



Representative  
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Governor Parnell's education bill does many things; among them, HB 278:

- allows wunderkind students to test out of classes in which they've already aced the subject material;
- puts the much maligned High School Graduation Qualifying Exam out of its misery;
- makes it easier for students to get certified in welding, diesel mechanics, and other vocational-technical tracks;
- and provides more funding for charter schools.



*Only one legislator in the Capitol likes pickled herring more than I do. The first reader to guess correctly gets a jar of Blue Hill Bay Herring in Wine Sauce delivered right to his/her door.*

Well done, Governor Parnell.

There's heaps more - much of which merits deliberation, constructive criticism, and revision - stuffed into HB 278. But it's a bill that should provide the elusive political equivalent of the three Rs: compromise, collaboration, and cooperation.

### **A Change in Programming**

Just when you thought things might be getting all warm and fuzzy and feel-good. Blammo! Vouchers!

The issue of school vouchers is the idea that parents should be able to effectively get a coupon, or "voucher," from the State of Alaska



*The charm of Southeast Alaska.*



to help discount their child's private school tuition, whether it's a private secular school, or a Catholic or Protestant or Jewish school, or an Islamic madrasa. (That last one was a little bit of a curveball, eh?!)

In short, vouchers would allow public dollars to pay for private and religious education. In exchange, parents could choose schools beyond just traditional public and charter schools: Parents could send their kids to a private or religious school that they may not have been able to afford without a voucher. For voucher advocates (I am not among them), the issue is not "vouchers"; it is "school choice."

But let's pause the voucher wonk talk for a moment.

The big *political* problem for voucher advocates is that the Alaska Constitution has an opinion on vouchers, and the Alaska Constitution is not a big fan. Alaska's founding [mothers](#) and fathers wrote only three sentences on the subject of k-12 education, but the third of these three sentences [is pretty blunt](#): "No money shall be paid from public funds for the direct benefit of any religious or other private educational institution."



*A warm welcome to Rep. Sam Kito III (D-Juneau) ("The New Guy"!).*

For voucher advocates, there is no choice: Unsheathe the red pen! Amend the Constitution! Delete that darn sentence.

### **The Curious Case of Senate Joint Resolution 9**

Senate Joint Resolution 9 (and its companion in the House, HJR 1) amends the Constitution and deletes that darn sentence. Simple enough, right?

But here's the other big problem for voucher advocates: a constitutional amendment requires two-thirds supermajority support from both the Senate and House of Representatives. (And even if a constitutional amendment passes the legislature, Alaskan



get to vote to accept or reject the amendment, and Alaska voters have proven themselves tough customers.)

Speaking generally: Democrats and rural/moderate Republicans oppose SJR 9/HJR 1. Urban/conservative Republicans and Governor Parnell support SJR 9/HJR 1. And a wily few legislators have danced a ballet worthy of a scene in *The Nutcracker* and managed not to state an opinion.

For the first month of session, most observers assumed vouchers were dead. There simply were not the votes. But like an opossum, SJR 9 came back to life, dramatically, 10 days ago.

*Friday March 8:* Wearing his trademark camo kuspuk (pictured), Senate President Charlie Huggins (R-Wasilla) announces that SJR 9 will be scheduled for a vote on the Senate floor the following Wednesday. Floor votes are political theater: You schedule a floor vote only if you know you have the votes – commitments signed in blood! – to pass the bill. (There is a certain inevitability of doom, or triumph, to floor debates, because the vote is almost always preordained.)



Photo credit: [Gavel to Gavel](#)

*The weekend:* Vouchers opponent Sen. Lyman Hoffman (D-Bethel): "They are so far away from getting the votes, it's crazy." The prime sponsor of SJR 9, Sen. Mike Dunleavy (R-Wasilla) coyly [speaks](#) to his vote count: "I have a pretty good sense, I'll leave it at that."

*Monday March 11:* Calls are made. Texts texted. Breath is held and prodigious amounts of gossip gossiped.

*Tuesday March 12 (day before the vote!):* During a press conference, commenting on the vote count, Sen. Dunleavy [announces](#) he's planning a vote no matter what: "We'll certainly know if the votes are there or not there when folks press the button." (Alaska legislators vote by pressing a red or green button.) It's a fourth and long, folks! Either bold, improbable victory

or glorious political martyrdom awaits.

*Wednesday March 13 (the big day!)*: Floor session - the big showdown - is scheduled for 11 a.m. Senate leadership huddles and postpones session till 1:30 p.m. Suspense heightens. But just before noon, Sens. Huggins, Dunleavy, and other backers announce that they're pulling the bill from the floor, retreating to fight another day.

The showdown is averted. But SJR 9 is still alive, and more drama surely awaits.

### **Good Karma**



Jessica McKay (pictured), a PhD student at UAF, interns for Sen. Dennis Egan (D-Juneau, also pictured). Put bluntly, Jessica is studying how impressed or unimpressed citizens are with their legislators. She has a survey, the answers are anonymous, and she needs your help.

Do Jessica a solid and [fill the thing out](#).

**Rep. JKT Media Management**

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If I can be of service in any way on any issue, please, don't hesitate to be in touch,

**Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins**