WRITE THESE LAWS
ON YOUR CHILDREN

Inside the World of Conservative Christian Homeschooling

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we don't have children immersed with the idea that everything is equal. Because if you are a committed follower of Christ, everything is not equal in many aspects.

Carrie takes perhaps strongest issue with homeschool critics who question her desire to instill a particular belief system in her children. "I completely disagree with the concept of 'your children should be exposed to x, y, z, p, d, q' and that 'oh, no, heaven forbid, they turn out and believe just like you!" She shakes her head in mock horror. "To me, that's biblical parenting. 'Write these laws on your children, put them on your doorframes, carry them with you as you walk along the road,'" she says, paraphrasing Deuteronomy 6. "I want my kids to think like me, not because I'm perfect, but because I love God and I want to follow him. I don't want them to be bound up in sin as much as I am, but I want them to look and say, 'Mom and Dad showed us how to know God; they're not perfect, they screw up, but they showed us'-and I want those beliefs to become theirs, obviously. The notion that they can learn and know God is of utmost importance in this house."

I'm sympathetic to Carrie's position here, not because I don't think it matters whether kids get exposed to diverse beliefs and perspectives, but because reasonable disagreement exists about what that exposure should consist of, much less how it needs to happen in a schooling context. It's one thing to endorse the value, in principle, of civic virtues such as tolerance and respect, and another to have enough certainty about how to police the teaching of those virtues in a homeschool setting.

Carrie Shaw has a clear sense, at least with her children at this young age, of what a good and godly education should be. "We're not going to live in some kind of evangelical, Christian, American red-state bubble," Carrie says, "but at the same time, there are things that may be presumed to be virtuous by others that I may not want them exposed to at a certain age." In addition to providing a rigorous education that would pass muster with any homeschool testing I can envision, she is committed to writing God's law on the hearts of her children—and will resist mightily any attempts by the state to impose a curriculum that sends any other message.

A mother describes her initial discouragement when starting to homeschool her six-year-old: the challenges of choosing and planning curriculum, transitioning from caregiver to formal instructor, and continuing to manage the rest of family life felt daunting, even overwhelming. "Then God gave me light," she writes. "Homeschooling was not just about fulfilling the education laws of our state or equipping our daughter to read, write, and compute. Homeschooling was a spiritual battle for the soul of our little kindergartner."

Not every homeschool parent views their commitment in these terms, of course, but most share a determination to provide a qualitatively different (and better) educational experience than institutional schooling can offer. And while not even all conservative Christians see their decision to homeschool as saving the souls of their children, their vision includes not only intellectual preparation but also a desire to shape the lives of their children in profound and lasting ways.

Homeschooling is clearly a significant educational trend, one that shows no signs of fading away. But the rise of homeschooling also holds implications that extend far beyond the phenomenon itself, raising fundamental questions about the purposes of education and the relationship between families, the state, and the society we share. Before turning to these broader issues, however, I offer some concluding reflections on the four central questions that framed my homeschooling journeys: What do homeschoolers do, and why do they do it? Do children learn to think for themselves? What do they learn about the relationship between faith and citizenship? And how, if at all, should homeschooling be regulated?
The variety of homeschool teaching and learning I encountered resists easy summary or sweeping conclusions. As I noted earlier, all four of my central questions contain potential tensions between legitimate but conflicting priorities, and this certainly held true when considering the wide latitude homeschool parents have to design their children’s education, for better or worse. I saw how many of the unique features of homeschooling—flexibility of structure and content, close personal relationships, and so on—could be used as a strength or become a weakness. On one end of the spectrum, I observed learning contexts that rivaled or even surpassed the best of institutional schooling; on the other end, I watched in dismay as children floundered in environments marked by poor teaching, questionable curricula, or frustrating interpersonal dynamics. Some parents make the most of homeschooling’s unique opportunities and deftly navigate its distinctive challenges, while others unfortunately do the opposite.

My second central question focused on the tension between parents’ desire to impart deeply held values and their children’s interest in learning to think for themselves. Conservative Christian parents don’t apologize for their intent to “write these laws on their children”—they believe this is their God-given right and responsibility. At the same time, I’ve yet to meet a homeschool parent who says she doesn’t want her children to learn to think for themselves and make their beliefs their own. These parents recognize—and are continually challenged by—the tension of encouraging such growth while also instilling an underlying foundation of Christian beliefs and commitments.

It’s worth keeping in mind that critical reflection about the belief system in which one is raised—whether religious or not—doesn’t necessarily entail rejecting those commitments, nor does it require some sort of massive existential trauma of doubt. The vicissitudes of life and the mix of ethical messages from our wider culture that inevitably permeates all but the most isolated upbringings seem likely to spur periodic reflection on what one believes and why. It’s also worth recognizing that at least some of the important work of learning to think for oneself can be done from within a given ethical framework. Many religions, Christianity included, have rich traditions of theological disputation—critically evaluating various doctrinal interpretations and their implications, even while accepting core beliefs of their tradition as givens.

 Outsiders often perceive conservative Christian homeschooling as a straightjacket of conformity, where kids have to toe an ideological line without the opportunity to consider other ways of being in the world. But I’ve also encountered plenty of public school students who rarely, if ever, bring a critical eye to their own way of life, their understanding of the world. Perhaps for some kids, whether homeschoolers or conventional schoolers, the capacity to step back and critically examine the culture and belief system in which they were raised won’t really develop until adulthood. The open question, of course, is what types of educational experiences beforehand will make that eventual self-awareness more or less likely.

The third question framing my exploration of homeschooling considered the idea of Christian citizenship. I began this book with an image of homeschoolers shaping culture at the highest echelons of power. It turns out that most of the people I talk with outside of Purcellville, however, seem less focused on political engagement or transforming the broader culture than Mike Farris’s Academy Awards dream envisions. Certainly many of the Generation Joshua participants strive for such power, but it’s worth keeping in mind that both GenJ and HSLDA represent only a slice of conservative Christian homeschoolers, and an even smaller percentage of homeschoolers in general. As one mother told me, “I may be a conservative Christian, but I don’t take marching orders from HSLDA.” It’s true that homeschoolers can come together quickly and powerfully when their homeschool freedoms appear at risk, but the fierce independence that leads many of them to homeschool in the first place also suggests more diversity within their ranks than might otherwise be assumed.

That being said, politics is clearly a realm that many conservative Christians have sought to influence, with significant success in recent decades. Some commentators suggest this political run is at an end. In a portrait of a conservative Christian homeschooling family in 2000, Margaret Talbot asserted that “it cannot be denied that as a political force, the religious right is flagging.” Coming eight months before the election of George W. Bush, such confidence now seems more than a bit mis-
placed. Seven years later, the same *New York Times Magazine* alerted us on its cover to "The Evangelical Crackup," and a *Times* op-ed the same day predicted that "Inauguration Day 2009 is at the very least Armageddon for the reigning ayatollahs of the American right." Perhaps. But even if the political power of conservative Christians wanes over the short term, the tension between private faith and public politics—and the conviction among many conservative Christians that the two are inexplicably linked—will remain.

However important these questions may be, they aren't the most vital ones for homeschoolers, conservative Christians or otherwise. At the core are the fundamental philosophical questions about who is responsible for the education of children, and the forms that such education can and should take. This is the ground where homeschoolers will plant their flag and not back down.

Some social commentators scoff when conservative Christians portray themselves as an oppressed minority, struggling to preserve their values amidst a hostile secular society. While *oppressed* may be the wrong word, it shouldn't stretch the imagination to recognize the ways in which conservative Christians see themselves struggling to navigate a culture marked by increasing ethical diversity and a seductive consumerist-materialistic value system that threatens to weaken their communities and commitments. For those who choose to homeschool, public schools often symbolize much of what is to be avoided or resisted in contemporary culture.

Although the courts have made clear that parents have the right to opt out of the public school system, recent judicial decisions have also underscored the near-total control public schools have if parents choose to send their children there. While such authority has been granted in legal terms, the moral authority that public schools have in this regard, to be trusted with the education of our children, must be continually earned. As I mentioned earlier, some homeschoolers use the term *government schools* to emphasize their perception that these institutions are imposed and operated by an outside force, rather than the public that represents and is made up of all of us. As a former high school administrator, I know from firsthand experience that it is no small task striving to satisfy the wide array of parental expectations about their children's schooling, both in terms of intellectual content and social values. But if parents don't feel any sense of partnership, if they feel that public schools are unwilling to

listen to what matters to them and why, it should not be surprising when they opt out.

A telling example of this difference between schools' legal and moral authority occurred in 1992, when parents sued a Massachusetts public high school for holding a mandatory "AIDS Awareness" assembly that allegedly included the outside presenter having students simulate group sex on stage accompanied by her graphic commentary. The First Circuit Court of Appeals—while acknowledging that the assembly "may have displayed a certain callousness towards the sensibilities" of the students—affirmed that the school did not violate students' legal rights (*Brown v. Hot, Sexy and Safer Productions*). The court's reasoning was that "if all parents had a fundamental constitutional right to dictate individually what the schools teach their children, the schools would be forced to cater to a curriculum for each student whose parents had genuine moral disagreement with the school's choice of subject matter." While this makes sense from a logistical standpoint, it still does not relieve public schools of the moral obligation to demonstrate sensitivity and caution in how they exercise their legal right to educate the students who walk through their doors. If they neglect or abuse this obligation, parents may decide the "public" in public schools doesn't include them—and the ensuing loss to our civic life together will extend well beyond a school's daily attendance count.

And what, if anything, can we conclude about homeschool regulation? In the midst of my journeys, I finally recognized a key reason why homeschool parents react so negatively to calls for regulation. Most parents—whether homeschoolers or not—see education, broadly construed, as part of their job description: raising a child involves constant teaching, and the most important lessons in life generally occur outside of school walls. But what I didn't fully appreciate at first is that homeschoolers take this a step further. They don't see any real distinction between this broader notion of education and formal schooling itself—which makes sense, if homeschooling is just woven into the fabric of everyday family life. And if homeschooling is seen as simply part of parenting, then it becomes easier to understand why many homeschool parents view regulations as unjustifiable intrusions into their sacred domain.

This expansive concept of parenting appears to run counter to at least some legal opinions, however. Homeschool advocates are fond of pointing
to the language of a 1925 Supreme Court decision (Pierce v. Society of Sisters), which, in striking down a law requiring all children to attend public schools, emphasized that "the child is not the mere creature of the State," and parents have the right "to direct the upbringing and education of children under their control."

But this landmark decision also made clear that "no question is raised concerning the power of the State reasonably to regulate all schools, to inspect, supervise, and examine them, their teachers and pupils, to require that all children of proper age attend some school, that teachers shall be of good moral character and patriotic disposition, that certain studies plainly essential to good citizenship must be taught, and that nothing be taught which is manifestly inimical to the public welfare." By contrast, the state is not permitted this degree of latitude in the general upbringing of children, a realm that clearly belongs to parents.

Similarly, a 1972 Supreme Court decision (Wisconsin v. Yoder) allowing an Amish community to end formal education for their children earlier than state law permitted also acknowledged that "there is no doubt as to the power of the State, having a high responsibility for education of its citizens, to impose reasonable regulations for the control and duration of basic education." (This decision also served to complicate matters involving religiously motivated homeschooling, by asserting that the regulatory power of the state over education is not absolute when religious beliefs enter the equation. When educational requirements impinge on "the traditional interest of parents with respect to the religious upbringing of their children," then a "balancing process" must ensue. As the idea of balancing suggests, however, this doesn't provide parents unlimited discretion, either, even when religious convictions are involved.)

So what role should the state play in the regulation of homeschooling? Even if we don't insist on a clear distinction between schooling and parenting, the state still has an obligation to protect children from educational neglect. Homeschool parents typically insist that they should have sole authority over the education of their children, whereas advocates of regulation frame the issue as a triad of interests, arguing that children themselves and society as a whole have much at stake as well. Ideally, these various interests will align—parents, for instance, generally want to raise self-sufficient children. But while most parents believe their efforts are dedicated to what's best for their children, this isn't always the case.

A complete absence of regulation (the current situation in a few states) obviously provides the most latitude for parents to educate their children as they see fit, but runs the greatest risk of neglecting the interests of children and the state. Extensive regulations (such as a prescribed curriculum or licensure requirements for parents), on the other hand, jeopardize the flexibility that makes homeschooling an effective educational choice for many families, and may offer relatively little added benefit compared to more modest requirements.

With this in mind, I want to propose three necessary conditions for homeschool regulation to be justified. First, vital interests of children or society must be at stake. Second, general consensus should exist on standards for meeting those interests. Third, there needs to be an effective way to measure whether those standards are met.

Basic skills testing for homeschoolers meets those criteria. Few would disagree that children have vital educational interests in basic literacy and numeracy, and it seems likely we could reach agreement on what skills are involved (some people would undoubtedly push for more than others, but even a lowest common denominator of simple reading comprehension and basic computation skills would be worth verifying). Finally, such straightforward skills would be relatively easy to assess objectively, despite Michael Farris's claims to the contrary.

The current mishmash of homeschool regulations aimed at academic accountability, on the other hand, doesn't measure up. The Wallises, for example, work the system in Vermont by having a friend simply sign off on a letter that Cindy composes—but at least they aren't hiding a lousy or nonexistent homeschooling program. In a 2004 series on homeschooling, the Akron Beacon Journal related the story of Coloradoan Nick Campbell, who sought an assessment of satisfactory progress for his six-year-old, Missy. He mailed a progress report and twenty-five dollars to the assessor, and received in return a satisfactory evaluation for Missy—who turned out to be his dog.

The states I visited—California, Vermont, Tennessee, Oregon, and Indiana—represent nearly the full spectrum of regulatory approaches to homeschooling, ranging from essentially nothing (Indiana) to required testing (Oregon) to curriculum approval and/or review (Vermont). What each has in common, however, is the easy opportunity for poor homeschooling situations to slip through the cracks. I can't help but wonder
how this might change if consensus could be reached among homeschoolers and policymakers that focused limited regulatory resources on the likely few situations where children are clearly being educationally neglected. Would it cost any more in time or resources for a state to administer a basic skills test every two or three years to a child than it would to try to make informed evaluations from a vast array of curriculum records and work samples? Wouldn't homeschoolers prefer a simple, straightforward assessment that most students would (I suspect) easily pass so they can get on with their studies?

What about regulations aimed at protecting other vital interests, such as children learning to think for themselves and society needing citizens capable of democratic self-rule? In both cases, even if most people recognize them as important goals, there is plenty of reasonable disagreement on what the threshold standards would be or how the state could reliably measure if students meet them. Therefore, I do not advocate regulations intended to foster or assess either of those interests.

Nevertheless, I heartily endorse an education in which students are provided the opportunity to engage thoughtfully with a variety of ways of understanding the world (and I'd argue that society should give our public schools more space and encouragement to do so as well). I strongly support an education that encourages students to think for themselves and contemplate leading lives beyond the contours of their present communities. In fact, I believe these emphases are just as important as skills of literacy and numeracy, and make for richer lives and better citizens.

But I also believe that a liberal democratic society needs to tread lightly when it comes to defining the boundaries of possible good lives, and even in specifying the virtues of good citizenship. In a real sense, our liberal democracy must risk its own well-being as it strives to persuade rather than compel its citizens to be generous listeners, tolerant neighbors, and willing to compromise in the face of reasonable disagreement. The challenge before us is how to foster an identification and commitment to a broader public that connects all of us while also recognizing that it is our narrower communities and private identities that sustain us in ways at least as powerful and important.

Regardless of whether homeschooling continues its rapid growth, the ongoing shift toward school-choice policies more broadly compels all of us to confront fundamental questions about the purposes of education: What knowledge and skills are essential? What virtues and commitments can and should we instill? What kind of people do we want our children to become? How do we learn to live together amidst disagreement about social and political issues? What role should religion play in our public square? And who decides the answers—each community, each family, or all of us together as a larger public?

In this book's opening pages, I observed that these questions are especially pertinent and personal for homeschoolers, beginning with their choice to step away from institutional schooling and extending to their selection of curricula and deciding how they will spend their days. I would also suggest that homeschoolers' answers to these questions of educational purpose and priority offer important reminders for those of us who work in or for public schools: In quality homeschooling, relationships are central—parents know their children as people and students, and they understand that education is more than formal academics within the classroom walls. Elaborate facilities and cutting-edge technology, while potentially useful, are no substitute for good teaching. Standardized testing may provide a helpful snapshot of a student's progress, but it is at best a partial glimpse of important learning. And perhaps most fundamentally, homeschooling should remind us that, in the words of historian David Tyack, there is no "one best system," no single ideal model for schooling.

Running through these chapters are several vital concerns: the relationship between parents and children, the rights and responsibilities of religious believers as citizens, and the purposes of education in a democracy. Each issue, I believe, prompts reasonable disagreement. But recognizing reasonable disagreement requires a certain degree of humility, an acknowledgement that we are fallible creatures, that none of us have direct, unmediated access to truth. Even for conservative Christians who believe firmly in the reality of absolute Truth, the apostle Paul observes that "for now, we see through a glass, darkly; but then, face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." So the question before all of us remains: how much room will we make for reasonable disagreement, for holding firm to our beliefs while also acknowledging our civic obligation to find ways to live together in mutual understanding and respect?
The implications extend far beyond concerns about homeschooling, or even religiously based schooling more generally. The range of ethical sources, values, and commitments held by students, families, and society at large presents both challenges and opportunities for our public square and the realities of democratic citizenship. Although the shape of both public and private schooling—and the relationship between them—may shift over time and context, the need for us to learn to be a public, to engage with fellow citizens in mutual respect, will remain as present and vital as always.

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