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VISIONS OF SCHOOLING: CONSCIENCE, COMMUNITY AND COMMON EDUCATION by Rosemary C. Salomone. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. 329 pp. Cloth. ISBN 0-300-08119-7.

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Many readers could learn a lot from Rosemary Salomone's VISIONS OF SCHOOLING, another new volume that endorses school vouchers. What's refreshing about Salomone's book is the route she takes getting there.

Some support vouchers based on an ideological belief in the superiority of the market for delivering virtually all goods and services. Some support vouchers because they find, in recent studies of small-scale school choice programs, strong evidence that voucher schemes significantly improve the educational outcomes of participants, especially formerly low-achieving children from low-income families.

Salomone's perspective on the education of America's children is altogether different. She sees more than a century of conflict over the fundamental purposes of schooling, and the primary way she traces that conflict is through a series of important legal decisions pitting public authorities against parents espousing religiously based beliefs.

As I understand her story, on the one side is the political mainstream -- closely tied to the leaders of the education profession. The vision of schooling held by this "establishment" is that their experts know best how to prepare today's youths for the American future that lies ahead of them. For a great many families there is no disconnect, because they share mainstream thinking. Their values are reflected in majoritarian politics, and they embrace today's public school professionals to educate their children.

In another camp are parents with very different aspirations for their children. Often they are religious dissenters. Sometimes this has meant Catholics, other times members of small religious groups like the Amish, and increasingly these days "fundamentalists" of a variety of stripes (although mostly conservative Christians) who find themselves at odds with the mainstream educational culture. These dissenters don't want their children to exposed to certain ideas or information presented by the public schools, or they don't want to have anything at all to do with public schools.

These objectors often argue that it is a question of "who owns the child?" - the parents or the state - and it clear how they would answer. Salomone examines the legal battles these families have fought in a variety of settings. Sometimes the state is trying to force parents to give up their children to the educational establishment - such as when, in the period after World War I, some states sought to close private schools; or such as when, in the 1960s and 1970s, some states sought to bar home

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schooling or to force Amish families to keep their children in school beyond age 16. Other times the conflict arises when parents seek for their children a partial escape from public schools, by having them excused from specific classes or materials. Even sharper conflicts occur when dissenters go to court seeking changes that would reshape local public schooling for everyone, not only for the children of objecting parents.

Salomone's most in-depth report is of the latter sort. She describes the ongoing efforts of some conservative Catholic families in well-to-do Bedford, New York to rid the public school curriculum of books, teachings, and practices that the objecting families argue constitute an illegal state endorsement of religion -- one that is, of course, very different from the religion of the claimants.

Salomone has considerable sympathy for these dissenting parents. Yet, she does not think it is right for them to have exclusive control over the education of their children. Rather, she sees conflicting social goals that need to be accommodated in a sensible manner. Salomone argues that parents have community-based duties towards their children when it comes to their education, just as parents have socially-based duties to feed and cloth their children. So, imposing certain kinds of schooling on children would amount to abuse or neglect.

Most centrally, Salomone believes that children have a right to be taught the "skills, character traits, and knowledge that foster democratic citizenship" (p. 255). More precisely, Salomone contends that there are certain "virtues that bind us together as a nation" including "incontestable moral values or character traits as honesty, integrity, responsibility, delayed gratification, self-control, and respect for authority combined with social values like concern for the environment and more fundamental political principles generally imparted through what we call civic education. Encompassed by the latter are justice and fairness, freedom of conscience and belief, freedom of expression, political and religious tolerance, and equality in the sense of equal dignity for all" (p. 233).

However, although public schools are one venue where this "common" education could be taught, Salomone recognizes that public schools are not the only place where such schooling is possible. Instead, she argues, there is a better way to assure children their rights while acknowledging legitimate parental interests. That way is to insist upon a common core in the education of all children but to allow it to be delivered in many forums. Through this line of analysis Salomone comes out for school vouchers for children from low-income and working-class homes that could be used at private schools -- so long as those schools are sufficiently regulated to assure children the common core of education for democracy they deserve. Otherwise, although the well-to-do would have choice, other families would be deprived of the practical ability to impart their family values to their children through qualifying private schools.

This isn't really a new argument. Both Stephen Arons and Michael Rebell earlier called for school vouchers for dissenters, especially religious dissenters. More than two decades ago, John Coons and I also rested our case for family control of education on the argument that families should be able to educate their children in ways that reinforce family values because that would be best for most children. Salomone kindly acknowledges our

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contribution.

What's primarily new in this book is her connection between the voucher idea and specific conflicts that have wound up in court. For those who teach courses on educational law and policy, Salomone's journey will probably contain few surprises, and will seem instead a familiar tour through well- known territory. Salomone has thoughtful things to say about the legal disputes she describes, but they are mostly points that an experienced instructor would already be discussing in class. For those not steeped in legal cases, however, Salomone's run-through may be a refreshing alternative to having to access the material via one of the "casebooks" from which courses on law and education are typically taught both at law schools and schools of education.

At the moment, there is a significant split in the school choice movement. Followers of Milton Friedman favor unregulated, universal vouchers worth half of what is spent in public schools. Their goal appears to be to move towards privatizing the funding of elementary and secondary education by drawing out of the public schools those middle-class and wealthier families who are willing to add on to the voucher from their own pocketbooks to obtain what they would see as better schooling for their children.

What I call "progressive" school choice supporters see the central problem with public education today as its failure to educate too many inner- city children from working-class and poor families. They would focus voucher plans on those families and insist that the vouchers be worth enough for those families to be able to buy good quality private schooling.

Salomone's proposal will be rejected by Friedmanites, both for its targeting and its regulatory features. Whether "progressive" school voucher supports would endorse it will depend primarily upon what regulatory regime would be put in place to assure the "common" education she believes all children must have. Salomone has not worked out all the details of her scheme, but she has suggested that the state might require "participating choice schools to follow loosely drafted curricular standards, particularly in history and civic education, that can be covered in any sequence of topics over the course of the elementary, middle, and secondary school grades" (p. 261). If Salomone were in charge of setting and enforcing such "curricular standards," probably most "progressive" voucher supporters would accept her regulation; but many would be wary of such "soft" requirements if left in the hands of a hostile public school bureaucracy to enforce.

It is highly unlikely that hard-core opponents of school vouchers will be won over by Salomone's arguments. Most of them have been unwilling to engage the school choice issue on the level she does. However, if they did, most would probably reject her basic claim that the state's interests are limited and that parental interests are important. Indeed, for many voucher opponents, the very idea that tax money might be used help families, even captive families, to provide religious education for their children is an anathema. There is something of an irony here. We don't have an official state religion in the U.S., although we are told that we are the most church- going people in the world. Yet, we are nearly alone among wealthy nations in our refusal to extend state generous financial support to users of religious schools.

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Another way to read Salomone's story is that so long as our social policy remains as it is, we will continue to see bitter legal battles over the reach and content of our public schools. What many school choice opponents have failed to appreciate is that if vouchers were made available to the outspoken objectors to today's public schooling, many of them might disappear -- by taking their children and their alternative views to private schools that suit them better.

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