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## Getting to the core of education

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North County public school students got their first taste of the Common Core State Standards, which means most parents will get a nibble of it as well.

Common Core involves what its name implies — special emphasis on core academic disciplines of math, English, science and social studies. The “standards” part is that the principles will be the same for every school in America, with a goal of forcing students to think in class, instead of just being there.

Common Core sprang from the minds of the nation’s governors, and has the full support of the Obama administration. As with most new programs generated by politicians, and supported by a president who is not universally supported, Common Core has its critics.

For example, 48 of the states have adopted the program, but two took a pass. Lawmakers in Alaska and Texas — both places known for their independent, separatist citizens — did not adopt Common Core, and have instead embarked on their own paths to academic improvement.

And therein lies another issue — Common Core has a wide range of detractors. The standardized performance outlines of the program have drawn criticism from the very liberal Brookings Institution, and from the very libertarian Cato Institute. Political conservatives castigate Common Core as a takeover of state and local education systems by politicians. Various governors have lamented the fact that their states have ceded control of public education to someone or something other than local educators.

A column in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and a guest commentary in the New York Times point out another potential problem with Common Core — a significant percentage of students who take tests based on Common Core programming fail, miserably. In Georgia at the end of the last school year, nearly two-thirds of students statewide who took the algebra test did not pass.

We aren’t certain that failure rate is necessarily a bad thing. While it made clear that a majority of Georgia’s students don’t know enough about basic algebra to pass a final exam, it also raises the question of what and how those students

were taught algebra in the first place. Similar tests in New York state had similar results — test scores collapsed.

One of the problems may be that Common Core was an egg first hatched by politicians, not educators. In fact, among the complaints about the program is that teachers — the men and women in the classroom trenches — did not have much opportunity for input about the Common Core strategy.

No matter how you feel about public education, and the role of teacher unions in the education process, it's just common sense that teachers should be among those planning a curriculum. Leaving educators out of the loop is counterintuitive.

But listening to students comment on their first exposure to Common Core in North County classrooms this past week, we are encouraged about the possibilities. A sophomore at Righetti High School had this to say, after her teacher explained how Common Core will work: "It's better than now. Now, it's just boring. You sit and listen to the teacher."

Common Core is meant to more fully engage students, ask them questions that aren't so easy to answer, and require some thought and deduction. Instead of just giving a rote answer, students will be challenged to think, and then give the reasoning behind their answers.

It could work, and a lot depends on how willing teachers will be to buy into Common Core principles and strategies. Many Americans believe thinking is becoming a lost art. Common Core may help find it again.