Bill Gates and the U.S. Army back it, along with a whole slew of educational associations, business leaders and think tanks. And despite the partisanship we often see in politics today, the development and adoption of the new, voluntary Common Core learning standards in literacy and math got off to an amazing start. Set in motion in 2009 by an alliance of Republican and Democratic governors, Common Core standards were quickly adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia.

So how did an idea that started off with such impressive support become so controversial?

A wide range of critics, including some parents, teachers, education experts, Tea Party activists and liberal groups have begun pushing back against the Common Core — or at least the way it’s being implemented. One state, Indiana, has already dropped the standards, and other states are considering doing so as well.

In surveys, most people seem open to the general idea of national standards and guidelines for learning. A 2010 study from Public Agenda showed that about 8 in 10 parents see having national standards in math and science as helpful. A new survey from the education reform group Achieve shows that 69 percent of voters support implementation of Common Core when
presented with a description of it. And support is even stronger among African-Americans, Hispanics, and "public school moms."

But the Achieve study also exposes a fault line. Just 16 percent of voters have read or heard "a lot" about the Common Core; and, among those who have, about 4 in 10 oppose it. Analysts at Achieve say the growing controversy is "leaving a more negative 'impression' among voters." Surveys from Education Next-Harvard PEPG showed that the percent of people opposed to the Core nearly doubled between 2012 and 2013.

A closer look at public and parent thinking suggests some additional reasons why the Common Core hasn’t been attracting more robust support. Consider:

Right now, many parents don’t see standards as the top problem in the schools. Asked about local high schools, for instance, more than half of parents say that "social problems and kids who misbehave" are more pressing issues than "low academic standards and outdated curricula." In focus groups, parents often mention low standards as one problem, but conversations are often more urgent, concrete, and impassioned when people talk about topics like lack of parental involvement, lack of student effort, and lack of funding. And 40 percent of parents say getting and keeping good teachers is an extremely or very serious problem at their child's school. Given that roster of concerns, many parents may see introducing a new set of academic standards as less urgent.

Many parents feel school is already hard enough. For its backers, the Common Core is a more focused, engaging, and challenging set of goals and expectations designed to bring student achievement in the United States up to the level of students in other advanced countries. This is something proponents of Common Core see as vital to our common future. And teachers and students who have actually worked with the Common Core often have very good things to say about it. But in the media and casual conversation, the sound bite is often that the Common Core is "harder," and nearly half of parents say their own "child works hard enough as is, the school does not need to make classes more difficult."

And then there's the testing. Among parents and teachers especially, some of the pushback to the Common Core is aimed at the testing attached to it, rather than the new standards themselves. And testing is territory where public thinking is more subtle and differentiated than surveys typically pick up. Most Americans, teachers included, see a role for testing to be sure, but many also question whether current testing policies are actually improving schools.
In a recent Kettering/Public Agenda study, parents offered more nuanced views on testing: "I think that [tests are] important," a New Orleans mother said, "but ... it's given too much weight, too much power," A Westchester, NY, mother made a similar point and expanded on it: "I think there are too many right now ... the schools aren't necessarily doing as well as they could because they're teaching to the tests — where the kids are scoring high on them — but they're not teaching them more creativity, more respect."

With the controversy escalating, groups supporting and opposing the Common Core are ramping up their public relations operations, and it's important for the public to hear what they have to say. But many people will be hard-pressed to sort their way through this controversy if all they see is a battle of claims and slogans, especially one that seems shrill and divisive. For many people, a knock-down, drag-out fight conducted mainly in the media will be more confusing than clarifying.

**Advocacy and persuasion are crucially important in an open and thriving democracy, but so are dialogue, listening, and genuine public engagement and deliberation.**

Our view is that there are better ways to help Americans weigh this important choice. Leaders need to better understand current public knowledge about the Common Core: What are people absorbing? What questions and concerns do they have? Then, we need to give people the chance to think through this issue in settings that encourage thoughtfulness, accurate information, and a respectful exchange of ideas. Advocacy and persuasion are crucially important in an open and thriving democracy, but so are dialogue, listening, and genuine public engagement and deliberation.

*Beyond the Polls is a joint endeavor of Public Agenda, the National Issues Forums, and the Kettering Foundation. Sign up to receive an email update when we have a new Beyond the Polls post.*