Erin Sponaugle: Nothing to fear about Common Core

I'm a teacher because as an adolescent and young adult, fear -- not education -- was at my core. I had my first panic attack when I was 10 years old. That first incident of being swallowed up by fear -- a cross between feeling suffocated and having a heart attack -- was the beginning of middle and high school years marred by angst and despair. Though desperate to have control of my life, I felt helpless each time I started to shake, breathe quickly, and feel the walls seemingly closing in on me.

Through the tragic experience of losing my aunt, Dawn Mose, a first-grade teacher for 35 years, and by serving as a mentor to at-risk students in college, I found value in myself and eventually overcame my anxiety disorder.

Hundreds of my aunt's former students recounted to me at her funeral how her classroom and life changed theirs for the better. I saw that making a difference in the social and academic growth of one child could help give me the sense of control I had been seeking for years. Choosing to become a teacher gave me the opportunity to impact the lives of children like my Aunt Dawn did. It also saved my life.

Today, education is at my core, because I know it is our best defense against fear. I equip my students with the knowledge and self-respect they need to think independently and creatively. My fifth-graders confidently proceed to middle school because they are prepared, critical thinkers with an unshakeable sense of self. I value their differences, backgrounds, and their obstacles, as I know from experience that what threatens to break us often ends up binding us together instead. My faith in my students' abilities to succeed and in their unlimited potential routinely helps lead them to success, and of this I am unapologetically proud.

We fear what we do not know or understand -- and unfortunately, fear is driving much of the opposition to the Common Core. It has been misstated that the Common Core State Standards are federally mandated, when in fact they have been voluntarily adopted in 45 states. The federal government hasn't, and won't, dictate what curriculum states must adopt for their classrooms. States chose the Common Core standards because their clear, rigorous expectations will elevate the performance of our students so they are globally competitive.

After visiting some of my students' "future colleagues" this summer in the classrooms of Germany, I am even more determined as an educator to provide my students with the tools and experiences they need to be on the same level as their peers around the world.

Fear of losing control can shake us, enrage us, and make us jump to false conclusions. There are fears, instigated by politics or misinformation, that the common core standards give away states' control over what is taught in our classrooms. But quality instruction and learning experiences were happening in our classrooms long before Common Core was in existence. If anything, higher standards give teachers more control.

Allowing more in-depth teaching, instead of having to quickly touch base on multiple topics, can create learning experiences for our students that are not only memorable but develop targeted skills to mastery.

If you open my classroom door and walk inside, you wouldn't see Common Core. You'd see children -- 10- and 11-year-olds on the cusp of adolescence. You'd see them engaged in conversations about the fairness of the Trail of Tears, creating multimedia presentations on endangered animals and their habitats, and using restaurant menus to price the perfect evening meal (by multiplying decimals, of course). My students are engaged, they're motivated, and they're learning, and that's what the common core standards are all about -- preparing our children to be confident and capable in an ever-more competitive world.

So in this season of education reform, I will not choose fear. Instead, I choose to understand what is happening and to do what I can to help others understand -- because that has always been at the core of education.