WINTER 2027

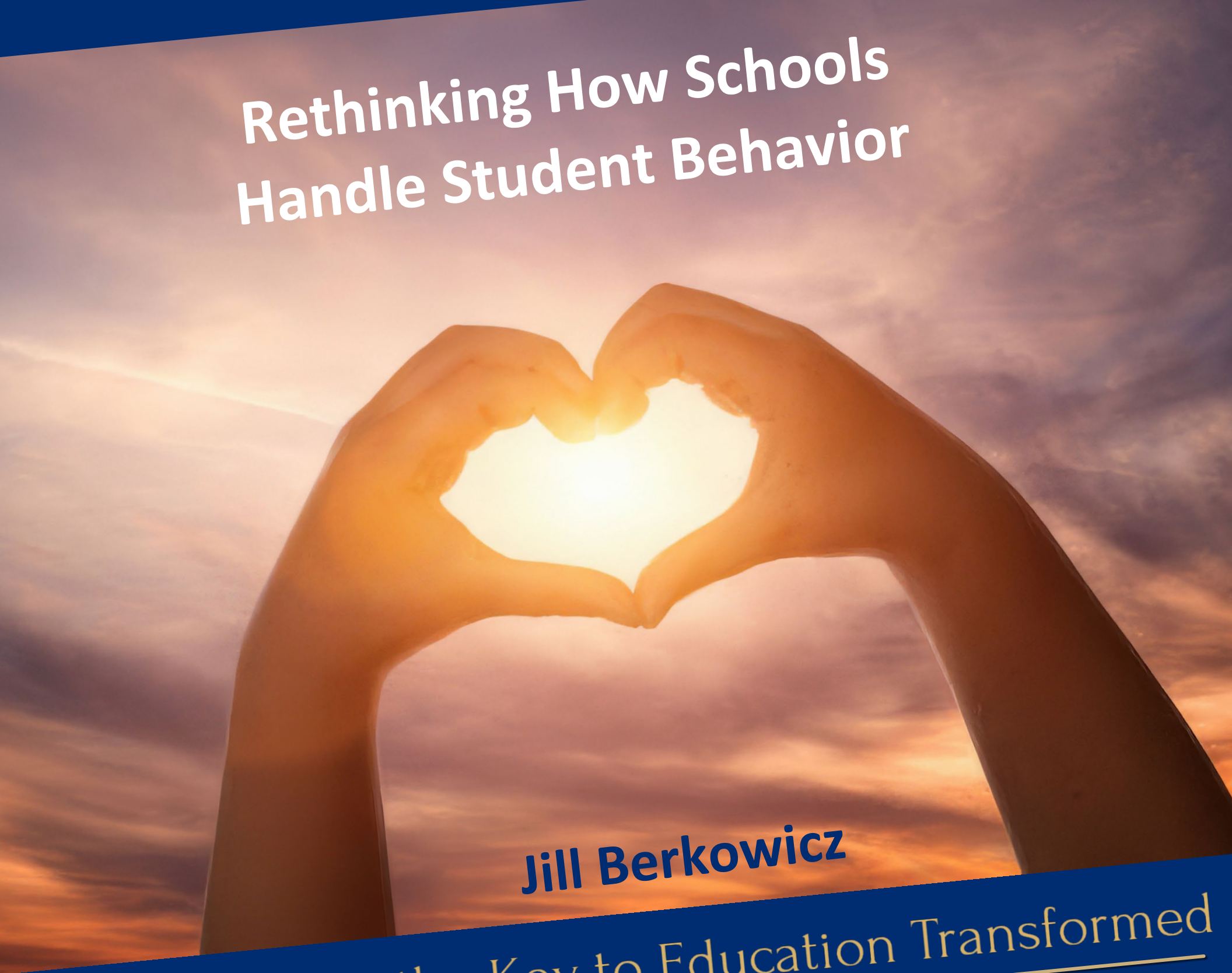
LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

A PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL

SHOWCASE EDITION

Rethinking How Schools Handle Student Behavior



Jill Berkowicz

Engagement as the Key to Education Transformed

The Worthy Educator
theworthyeducator.com

WINTER 2027
LEGACY®
TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

CALL TO ACTION



Rethinking How Schools Handle Student Behavior

doi.org/10.67428/2027winter09

Jill Berkowicz, Ed.D.
Career Educator
State University of New York at New Paltz
Poughkeepsie, New York

Students who receive a 'label' receive the interventions they need. Along with the support, they carry with them beliefs held by parents, teachers, leaders, the student him or herself and the communities in which they interact. Those beliefs can be individual and different for each of them, preconceived all. In addition to those with that label, we are finding more students with behaviors who are not 'labeled.' Whether labeled or not, teachers are finding themselves faced with students who are, in fact, 'quirky', 'sensitive' or 'disobedient'. The students may not have changed, but thankfully we know so much more about the etiology of those behaviors now and how to interact with them.

In a recent conversation with a teacher who was asking himself why a particular student had acted out in his class. He struggled to calm her down. Struggled. The child was disciplined for this behavior. The teacher was disappointed. The parents were both embarrassed and saddened.

A New Era

We are teaching a generation of students who hear sounds differently, eyes see colors and light in different ways, who find moving from one activity to another challenging, and they and we may not realize it. Or at least we think this is new. Now I question how I understood students we disciplined in my years working with students. Did we choose discipline because their behavior was not part of the Code of Conduct without understanding what was causing the behavior? Probably. But with research and understanding I now believe we can cope with the provocative event(s) by teaching rather than punishing. We can avoid the resulting behavior by knowing what can provoke an outburst (for example) with knowledge and tools we now have.



Consider a child being asked to 'read independently' and the lights are bright in the classroom, another class is walking down the hallway, a child in the room is moving their chair, and a delivery truck is driving into the driveway making truck sounds and the smell of gasoline is faint and unnoticeable to most but this child smells it. There are children (and adults) who can block all of this out. And there are those who can not. I am not only speaking of children who have been 'labeled'. We now need to create an environment of understanding and support. What does the child who 'misbehaves' or resists change look like? Are transitions difficult? Is it difficult to go from a math activity to a reading one? Or is it difficult to go from gym to reading or even lunch? There are so many shifts and changes in a school day for a child of any age.

Blame is easy. Some blame teachers, some blame parents. The fact is schools are charged with preparing an environment that serves all children. Some arrive prepared to learn. Others arrive needing to learn how to learn. No matter how they arrive, teachers are expected to bring them along, grade by grade as developing learners, and gatherers of information as well as developing more and more complex social skills. Some children can be overwhelmed by simply being asked to do something. Now we have new information that can help the adults create an environment in which all children can remain calm and cooperative, happy and able to learn. There are children who are sensitive to energy, tone, smell, bright lights, sounds, are affected by their school day. Add to that children who have a response to demands (like change of activity) who may experience that with anxiety and a sense of danger. They are in our classrooms. They are ours to teach and guide.



Our Opportunity

This is a huge shift from the standard(s) led by Codes of Discipline. We are in a moment where we can change and move away from consequence being the North Star. Educators and parents can take on responsibility and teach children to understand their bodies and emotions may feel like danger but in fact are not. They are not. However, if this is how they are experiencing their lives and when we do not use our skills to learn and teach, then in fact, they are in danger.

Although retired for 13 years, I have been blessed with continuing relationships with teachers, leaders, and parents. As a result, I continue to grow and develop as a knowledgeable person, educator, advocate, leader, parent and grandparent. I reflect on student behavior and how we handled it. So many students were disciplined for their behavior. I wonder what that discipline (detention for example) actually did to help them grow. Or if it helped them grow. After all, we know that teachers do more than teach their subject(s). Teachers also raise children. Now is the time for all educators working with all students to understand these new challenges.

We call on our district and school leaders to set a new direction. Schools can learn together with all the professionals who have done it 'the other way', and skillfully now help all students understand themselves. But first, teachers, administrators and parents must learn together about the causes of behaviors that prevent learning for the student and sometimes for the students' classmates. What provokes a student to act out no longer needs to be a mystery. Understanding behavior and what provokes it is paramount. Sharing that knowledge with other teachers and administrators is key. Helping parents understand is also the job of the school.

Our intervention when a child has a breakdown (whether by acting out, shutting down, or turning off) must be more in response to what is happening inside the child and not simply to the behavior demonstrated. That change in the adult's behavior invites the student to feel safe, seen, and ready to learn.

Schools are a place of learning, and learning can only happen when one feels safe and in relationship.

Certainly, discipline has a role. However, discipline must include reflection, teaching and learning, support, guidance and follow up in order for the learning environment to remain successful for all.

We can do that for our students.

References

Centers for Disease Control. (2026), About Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Grandin, Temple (2020) The Way I See It: A personal Look at Autism.

Mallory et al. (2021), Implications of Sensory Processing and Attentional Characteristics Associated With Autism in Academic Settings.

Marco et al. (2011), Sensory Processing in Autism: A Review of Neurophysiologic Findings.

U.S. Department of Education. (2022), Positive, Proactive Approaches to Supporting Children With Disabilities.

U.S. Department of Education. (2022), Supporting Students With Disabilities and Avoiding the Discriminatory Use of Student Discipline Under Section 504.

Valdebenito et al. (2018), School-Based Interventions for Reducing Disciplinary School Exclusion: A Systematic Review.

After 30+ years in Public School Education, and teaching graduate students in Educational Leadership and blogging for EducationWeek on that same topic, Jill Berkowicz retired to consulting and grandmothership. Continuing her interest and support for educational leaders, her attention includes reflection on past practice (that continues today) and the affect upon the manner in which children are treated, expected to behave, and the role of punishment in the educational environment. Jill's focus continues to be how the educational environment, particularly in public schools, must remain focused on the invitation to all students to learn, take risks, achieve, and function in a social environment. It is not simply the test at the end that matters, it is the accumulation of knowledge, the ability to perform that knowledge, and the growing ability to function in a social environment.

Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted from educators implementing new and innovative approaches to teaching and learning, as well as education organizations sharing their work in dedicated showcase editions, and are planned and released on a rolling basis. Learn more, including our submission guidelines for prospective contributors, at theworhtyeducator.com/journal.