

July 31, 2024

ISSN 1094-5296

**Brenner, M., & Miller, K. (2024). *Redesigning special education systems through collaborative problem solving: A guidebook for school leaders*. Routledge.**

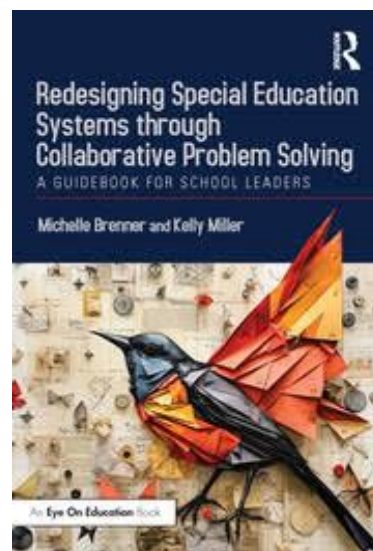
**Pp. 134**

**ISBN: 9781032589947**

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*If we can shift our approach from a viewpoint of challenges in special education that need to be fought and move instead to view such challenges as communications that help us confront the work differently, then we can begin to address the impossible work ahead of us. (p. 11)*

The quotation above encapsulates the purpose of the book, *Redesigning Special Education Systems*: to introduce a new model for viewing and addressing the challenges of special education. Authors Michelle Brenner and Kelly Miller pioneered their collaborative problem-solving framework while working in Boulder Valley Schools' Special Education District Leadership, tackling the mounting challenges in special education in a unique and effective way.



Challenges in the special education field are growing in the United States. As highlighted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), for the 2023-24 school year, 70% of positions with vacancies in public schools were for special education teachers, and 77% of schools reported special education positions as “very” or “somewhat” difficult to fill. This book not only addresses these pressing staffing issues but also sheds light on other problems in special education, such as the “boxing ring” feeling of IEP meetings, a post-pandemic culture shift in the value of teachers, and decreased federal funding. A new approach is needed, and *Redesigning Special Education Systems* offers a fresh perspective and method to address these challenges.

Da-Tokpah, B. (2024, July 31). Review of *Redesigning special education systems through collaborative problem solving: A guidebook for school leaders* by Brenner, M., & Miller, K. *Education Review*, 31. <https://doi.org/10.14507/er.v31.3857>

This guidebook presents the foundation, framework, and steps in the collaborative process the authors implemented in the Boulder Valley (CO) School District (BVSD), where Brenner serves as a director and Miller is a transition specialist for Special Education District Leadership. The process begins with a comprehensive understanding of the issues from multiple perspectives and the establishment of partnerships with the community to set and plan the achievement of specific goals. The next step involves problem-solving during implementation and finding ways to sustain goals into the future. The authors are forthright about the limitations of their collaborative process. It is more time-consuming, not universally applicable to all challenges, and more difficult to implement than previous models of a prescribed intervention. However, the book is filled with successful implementations of the collaboration process within the BVSD, demonstrating that the collaborative process can lead to successful, long-term redesigns for special education challenges in those schools.

The authors aim to share their tested research-based collaborative process and its critical components with other school leaders and the general public. To this end, the short, interactive guidebook is designed to build the reader's capacity to implement the framework. The book is ideal for any school leader, from team leader to superintendent, searching for a new way to create local change to address the countless problems in special education. It could also be an excellent course resource for a school administrator certificate or master's program.

The book is divided into two sections. The first three chapters provide the grounding, framing, and explanation of the “Six Not-So-Easy Steps for Collaborative Change:”

1. Dive into the problem and seek to understand
2. Seek partnerships within the community groups involved
3. Set goals for change
4. Figure out what it will take to meet those goals
5. Have the hard conversations and make the necessary changes
6. Don't stop there (p. 43)

The next five chapters overview key elements that make the collaborative process successful: unexpected partnerships, adult learning, empowering staff, student strengths, and retaining collaborative staff. These chapters share many successful programs developed by the authors in their professional capacity. For example, Brenner and Miller share how they worked to adapt the research-based peer tutoring method into an elective class in BVSD middle and high schools. The peer tutoring elective provides additional support to peers and their teachers and is typically “life-changing” for tutors excited about a career in education. This example reflects another critical finding of the collaborative process: unexpected additional benefits. Not only did the class address the need for more individualized instruction but also future staffing needs; it provided students a tutoring experience that motivated them to pursue careers in education.

The guidebook is interactive, with a closing activity at the end of each chapter that contains prompted questions, activities and space to reflect. This book design prompts the reader to take notes, reflect, and engage within each part of the process. This format also aligns with the book's key concept: each collaborative process must be individualized, allowing readers to process and adapt the information to their unique local needs. Also, the closing activities and reflection boxes model the parallel adult learning process for engaging with text to personalize learning, the focus of Chapter 5.

The most unique feature of this volume is its expectation of the reader's participation throughout the book. In the concluding chapter, the authors provide eight activities that guide readers through their own special education redesign process and plan. This chapter reminds us that frameworks can be helpful in theory, but to be useful, they must be adaptive to local contexts and circumstances. The authors' thoughtful prompts result in an encompassing approach to the collaborative development, implementation, and sustainability of change within the special education system. However, if readers do not engage in these closing activities and reflection, the authors' goal of leading them through a collaborative problem-solving process to create their own solutions will not be reached, and the framework will remain a set of ideas not put into practice. On the other hand, if readers fully engage with the process described in *Redesigning Special Education Systems*, they may reap the benefits of the collaborative problem-solving process. The guidebook offers "a leadership tool that can help guide growth in times of renewal or help guide a resolution when many challenges are piled at once" (p 122). For anyone searching for a new way to address challenges in special education in their local school, district, or state, this volume provides a powerful, tested framework for collaborative solutions.

## References

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## About the Reviewer

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*Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State

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