

The CO-TOP Model

The Basic Premises of the CO-TOP Model

The underlying premise of the CO-TOP Model is that initial paraeducator training is most successful when it:

- is provided in familiar surroundings (like school buildings) rather than distant college campus classrooms;
- provides college credits and results in a certificate of completion;
- provides choices to paraeducators who may:
 - only complete self-selected or district-directed requirements; and/or
 - complete an associate-level degree.

Why the CO-TOP Model?

The CO-TOP model is a feasible solution to paraeducator training needs because it is comprehensive, systematic, and sustainable.

CO-TOP is comprehensive because it:

- Considers all the tasks paraeducators perform, and offers a menu of relevant courses
- Is based on curriculum validated by experts and field-tested with paraeducators
- Is specific to the roles of paraeducators (not watered-down teacher training)
- Delivers curriculum that incorporates both national and local policies and procedures
- Addresses the training needs of paraeducators as adult learners
- May be offered as frequently or infrequently as necessary to meet local needs

CO-TOP is systematic because it:

- Is based on a coherent curriculum
- Includes a management system
- Provides easy verification of content integrity and depth
- Offers structure for delivering ongoing paraeducator training,
- Offers training and support for trainers,
- Provides systems for coaching paraeducators on the job
- Includes needs assessment materials

CO-TOP is sustainable because it:

- Relies on internal resources
- Involves internal commitment and leadership
- Fosters strong local policy development
- Involves teachers and other school professionals
- Involves ongoing coaching of paraeducator skills on the job
- Involves on-going program monitoring, documentation and evaluation
- Provides a forum for exploring funding options
- Is accessible to all paraeducators
- Is affordable
- Can be offered as often as needed to accommodate personnel turnover

How does CO-TOP handle Paraeducator Supervision?

Another important feature of the CO-TOP model addresses the issue of *lack of preparation of school professionals to supervise paraeducators*.

The Paraeducator Supervision Academy (PSA) is a class for school professionals (e.g. teachers, librarians, nurses, occupational, physical and speech language therapists) so they can supervise and work effectively with paraeducators. Included in the PSA and the training curriculum for paraeducators is considerable attention to *the changing roles and responsibilities* of both paraprofessional and professional school employees. Because both supervisors and paraeducators gain information through the same curricular source and program model, the information is consistent with state law, state and local regulations, policies and procedures.

How Does the CO-TOP Model Work?

The CO-TOP Model is designed to reside within a school district or in a consortium of districts. The district takes the following steps.

1. **District** identifies potential trainers
2. **District** prepares trainers to teach the CO-TOP Academies
3. **District** acquires the **CO-TOP Academy Instructors' Guides**
4. **District** decides dates, locations and academies they want to offer to paraeducators
5. **District** arranges for college credit through local community colleges or through The PAR²A Center (for Colorado districts)

6. **College** provides registration materials, evaluation forms, other paperwork for employment of trainers
7. **College** pays the trainer (out of tuition funds) or arranges with district for another payment option.
8. **District** monitors quality of curriculum, instruction, and application of skills.

What Do Paraeducators Say About CO-TOP Trainers?

"Thank you {instructors} for helping to improve us {paraeducators}!"

"Instructors were very welcoming, were well-organized, very responsive to questions and concerns we had."

"The instructors were all excellent and empathetic to the Para's role in school."

"I love how our instructors taught class. They made it very interesting and enjoyable."

"I really appreciate all the extra work and effort put out for these classes; I always walk away empowered to assist my student (who I love) in a better way."

"I always go home after class feeling confident knowing more than I started the day"

What Do Trainers Say About Paraeducators Who Take CO-TOP Academies?

"...The paraeducators want to devour everything... They're not there because they have to be, they're there because they want to be and they want to learn. It's very personally gratifying to be able to give them what they need. I really enjoy doing it."

"...It's just exciting to see the paraeducators confidence build because then the students respect them more and they feel safer and they do better."

"...They were so highly motivated to learn. How great their thirst was to learn more about the profession and about kids. They are the most highly motivated adults I know."

"Seeing how motivated they are, this has also helped me respect them even more than I did in the past."

"...After being in sped so long you think that every one knows what you know and it surprised me to find how little information and background they had."

What Do Teachers Believe Their Role As CO-TOP Trainers Has Done For Them?

"CO-TOP taught me to be a better advocate and a better supervisor for my paraeducator."

"Training paraeducators has given me a new challenge and I think that I have become a better teacher. Going over information refreshes my knowledge and I feel that I am learning as I am teaching. It really reenergized me -- there's nothing like a new challenge."

"It has been a very enjoyable experience for me and it also opens my eyes to being a more empathetic person...and helps me see the real world that others are working in."

What Do Administrators Say About CO-TOP?

"I overheard two paras saying, 'It is just so wonderful to learn all of these things, I just want to keep learning and learning'... and I thought, isn't that amazing. ... The whole idea of learning again has become fun... and kind of its own intrinsic reward for them... I thought it was very gratifying."

"It's not unusual for the paras to be hesitant to be engaged in (taking college classes), simply because it's a class and that has its fears as well... But, once they are engaged in that learning and see the benefit that it has just for them as a person involved with kids, then they start to develop their own momentum and their own energy to continue the training.... They get their feet wet and get really motivated from the first class."

"I would say that Paraeducators who get training in any area tend to stay longer than those who have a rough year and fly by the seat of their pants. Some of them get frustrated and leave."