

OST OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT OBSERVER PROCEDURES

Overview

Policy Studies Associates, Inc. (PSA) designed the Out-of-School Time (OST) Observation Instrument to collect consistent, objective observation-based information on OST programs, whether within schools or in other settings. Two sets of assumptions about high-quality OST programs guided the instrument's development: (1) successful programs employ a qualified staff, offer youth both academic and interpersonal skill-building, and operate with adequate space and resources; and (2) successful programs offer varied instructional activities that are content-based and mastery-focused and that encourage positive youth-to-youth and youth-to-staff relationships (Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Reisner, White, Russell, & Birmingham, 2004; Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2007).

For OST program staff and researchers, the OST Observation Instrument provides a tool for measuring observable indicators of positive youth development and program features known to contribute to positive youth outcomes. The instrument's conceptual framework is grounded in the youth development literature and reflects recent research on out-of-school time quality.

The OST Observation Instrument includes the following:

- **Cover Sheet:** A checklist for capturing basic facts about the observed activity, such as activity type, staff roles, number of participants, and grouping patterns
- **OST Indicator Item Ratings:** A list of items under five domains: youth relationship-building; youth participation; relationship-building among staff and youth; instructional strategies; and the activity content and structure

Observers rate each item on a 1-7 scale.

- **Environmental Context:** Items related to the adequacy of the learning context for the observed activity, including adequacy of supervision, space and materials
- **Observer's Synthesis:** Observer's syntheses of the activity and its overall quality

Sampling

Reviewing the program's activity schedule. If possible, meet first with the program director to select observable activities using the following guidelines:

1. Identify activities that reflect the range of main activities offered at the program.
2. Observe across varied grade levels as well as varied activities.

3. Verify with the program director that each scheduled activity will occur as planned and determine where it is located.
4. Verify the staff member who will be present at each activity, noting the staff member's title, level of education, or special skills (e.g., high school student, certified teacher, arts specialist) to accurately rate the staff categories.

Determining the number of observations to conduct. At the outset of the observation period, site visit teams should co-conduct an observation to confirm inter-rater reliability, following the procedures described above. Check YES in the co-observed checkbox and enter both observers' initials.

After completing this observation, take 5 to 10 minutes to discuss the commonalities and differences in your ratings and to achieve a mutual understanding of the definitions, ratings, and quality of activities and interactions observed. **DO NOT CHANGE THE ORIGINAL RATINGS.**

In a typical, three-hour OST program that offers multiple activities, each site visitor should observe 4 to 6 activities. Each site visitor team should complete an observation instrument for every observed activity during the program visit. This level of observation will ensure a representative sample of the typical afternoon in an OST program and will generate the optimal number of observations for later analysis. If the after-school program is not comprehensive, or if it offers relatively few activities, the site visitors or program leaders should determine the appropriate number of observations to be conducted based on the requirements for adequate data collection. The reliability and validity of quality judgments increase as the number of observations increases.

Selecting activities to observe. Site visitors should select activities to observe that are representative of the activities offered and that prioritize skill-based and/or content-based activities. ***Observe all major activities offered, regardless of the reported quality.***

- Depending on the activities offered, site visitors should try to co-observe **either** a homework help or content-based academic enrichment activity and **either** an arts or fitness activity. *Other enrichment* activities can replace the second, non-academic or homework joint observation.
- Site visitors should avoid observing activities and groups with the same staff and the same students in the same activity session more than once in a single observation visit. However, if an activity involves two very different dimensions of teaching/learning, such as students planning a dance performance in one observation and students practicing the performance later, the same activity or group can be observed twice during the same observation visit. The same activity leader and content can also be observed if the observation involves a different set of staff/student pairings (e.g., a different group of students).

Completing the OST Observation Instrument

Every activity should be observed for 15 minutes.

STEP 1. Enter the activity area and situate yourself as unobtrusively as possible to observe the setting. Fill in the introductory items on the *Cover Sheet* (e.g., location, observer, date, time) and check appropriate descriptive categories.

STEP 2. In the *Observer's Notes*, record the types of interactions, strategies, and other actions occurring. To the extent possible, record details about the activities, youth and staff comments, and descriptions of the general affect in the setting.

After 10 minutes of observation, while still in the activity setting, complete Steps 3-5.

STEP 3. Complete all sections of the *Cover Sheet* and, in the box on the left of each indicator, enter an *OST Indicator Item Rating* using a rating of 1-7, as follows:

- 1 = Exemplar is not evident**
- 2 = Exemplar may occur momentarily but is not sustained
- 3 = Exemplar may occur once or twice but is rarely evident throughout the observation**
- 4 = Exemplar occurs more frequently but is not fully evident
- 5 = Exemplar is evident or implicit**
- 6 = Exemplar is strongly evident or implicit, but could be more consistent
- 7 = Exemplar is highly and consistently evident**

To select one of the preceding ratings, first move to the ODD NUMBER that most closely reflects how evident and pervasive the item is. If that number is imprecise, move up or down to the even number that more accurately reflects the item's level of presence within an activity.

HELPFUL HINT: When rating an item, read its definition and then underline those elements that are observed. This will help highlight how much of an item's full definition occurred and clarify the prevalence of the behaviors during the activity segment.

Neutral items. Use the "5" rating when the exemplar is implicit in the activity. For instance, if youth are observed engaging in casual, friendly interactions, then the rating would be a "5."

Homework activities. Homework help activities should not be rated on the *Content* and *Structure: Activity* items of the *OST Indicator Item Ratings*.

STEP 4: Complete the three *Environmental Context* questions on the last page of the *OST Indicator Item Ratings*.

STEP 5: Complete the *Observer's Synthesis* section. Write a brief summary of the activity and one or two sentences that describe or synthesize the overall quality of each element.

Observing more than one staff member in an activity. If more than one staff member is actively working in the room with youth, ratings involving staff should reflect all staff interactions taken together. For instance, if one staff member uses effective behavior management techniques while the other resorts to threats and sarcasm, the ratings should reflect an average of the two approaches (e.g., a rating of “3” or “4”).

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

COVER SHEET ITEMS	
ACTIVITY NAME	The title of the activity, as given by the project
ACTIVITY OVERVIEW	1-2 sentence description of activity
ACTIVITY TYPE (check all that apply)	
Homework Help/ Test Prep	Check this category when youth work on homework or specially assigned skill drill. If youth participate in academic activities that are not homework, mark <i>Academic activities</i> . If youth are working on an in-depth, expanded academic assignment, but it IS homework, mark THIS category.
Tutoring	Tutoring refers to skill-focused academic assistance to individuals or small groups with common learning needs. It is distinguished from homework or other activities in that it aims to strengthen or remediate specific academic skills.
Academic activities (not homework)	This item refers to an activity that develops broad-based conceptual/cognitive learning; it may or may not be directly related to school content, but it includes enriched supplementary instructional content that goes beyond homework, tutoring, and rote skill practice. Examples could include purchased literacy or numeracy curriculum, research, science, social studies, newspaper club, or poetry club. If supplementary activities are offered but are not in-depth or cognitively rich, do not mark this activity type.
Story reading/ listening	Reading or listening to a story.
Visual arts	Specialized visual arts-based activities such as painting, drawing, clay/sculpture, photography, knitting, sewing, etc. that include structured lessons in appropriate use of techniques, materials, and design elements to create products. Often the activity involves creating projects in multiple stages that may take several days, weeks, or months to complete.
Dance	Dance lessons, practices, or performances. This area does NOT include athletic types of movement such as cheerleading or martial arts, which are marked in one of the <i>Sports</i> categories.
Music	Instrumental or vocal lessons, practices, or performances.
Drama	Drama lessons, practices, or performances.
Crafts	Non-specialized arts activities. Involves creating a product for fun, but does not involve basic instruction in design or technique. Often is a short-term project, involving a product but requiring only the activity period or a few days to complete.
Sports—practicing/ learning a skill	Preparation and training in a sport or athletic skill of any kind, including basketball or baseball skill clinics, martial arts, gymnastics, weightlifting, yoga, cheerleading practice.
Sports—playing competitive or non-competitive physical game	Supervised or non-supervised games using athletic skill, indoors or outdoors, such as basketball or baseball games.
Open, unstructured time (e.g., table games, Internet, free play)	This category refers to a focused activity freely chosen by youth and not structured (but may be supervised) by adults; typically, youth have invented, selected, or identified a task and are implementing it without adult direction.
Staff-assigned learning games (dominos, chess, etc.)	Staff assign youth to engage in certain specified educational games.

COVER SHEET ITEMS (continued)		
Community service	Planning or assisting with projects that support the quality of community life or foster program-school or community-school linkages.	
College/career preparation	Activities directly involved in career or college planning or preparation.	
Cultural awareness clubs/reflection groups	Activities/projects that develop cultural, gender, religious, or ethnic awareness, understanding, or identity.	
Other	Describe here activities observed that cannot be categorized or grouped above (e.g., student government).	
Type of Space (Check only one.)	Classroom	Check the <u>one</u> location in this category that <u>best</u> applies to the setting in which the activity takes place. If "Other" is marked, specify the type of space used.
	Gym	
	Computer lab	
	Library	
	Cafeteria	
	Auditorium	
	Art room	
	Music room	
	Hallway	
	Outside playground	
Other		
Total Staff (Count and record in the space on the right the NUMBER of staff in each activity. The number should correspond to staff levels/skills. Do not count middle school students who are acting as helpers.)	High school student	High school students are in grades 9-12.
	College student or young adult	College student or young adult refers to staff who have finished or left high school and are approximately 18-24 years of age.
	Certified teacher	Certified teachers are classroom teachers from the host school OR another school.
	Specialist/other professional	A specialist has skills or talents that are the focus of the activity, such as a musician, artist or chess instructor. <i>Other professional</i> includes social workers, guidance counselors, or other staff with professional degrees.
	Other adult	Other adult refers to staff approximately 25 years of age or older; these staff are school aides, paraprofessionals, parents, community members, etc. who may or may not have an undergraduate degree.
Total Participants (Count and record the number of girls and the number of boys in the activity.)	Total number of girls	If in doubt about gender, make an educated guess rather than disrupting the class.
	Total number of boys	

COVER SHEET ITEMS (continued)		
Grade Levels (Circle all that apply.)	Grade level observed	Circle all the grades that are represented in the classroom or activity space. More than one category can be circled, if appropriate.
Participation Type (Check one.)	By age or grade	Indicate the predominant way that youth are selected to participate in this activity.
	By interest (child's choice)	
	All attendees (in the program)	
Skill Development (Check one.)	This is a homework activity	Check "This is a homework activity" if youth are working on homework.
	Skill-building or skill practice/reinforcement	Check Skill-building/skill practice if (1) Youth are engaged in an activity that builds on a previously learned skill and <u>is intended</u> to help youth reach the next level of mastery, or if a new skill is learned and built upon. Example: a new piece of dance choreography, rehearsing the next scene in a play, revising a piece of writing, or continuous practice and improvement of a recital piece. (2) Youth are using or reinforcing a skill already learned but the activity is <u>not intended</u> to help youth reach the next level of mastery. Example: completing a math skills sheet.
	Neither	Check "neither" if the activity is neither skill-building nor a homework activity.
Primary Skill Targeted (Only complete this area if "Skill-building/practice" were checked in the Skills Development section above.)	Physical/athletic	Athletics, games, skills of physical sport (including martial arts, yoga, cheerleading, gymnastics, etc.).
	Artistic	Artistic skills, working in any medium (visual, musical, dance, dramatic, photographic, video, etc.).
	Math/numeracy	Mathematics learning, skill development, practice.
	Reading/ writing/ literacy	Reading/language arts learning, skill development, practice.
	Decision making/ problem solving	Developing skills in making practical or conceptual decisions or solving practical or conceptual problems.
	Interpersonal communication	Developing skills that involve self- or group reflection, negotiating, interaction, and/or improvement of connections/relationships among people.
	Other	Check this category AND DESCRIBE here specific other content areas (e.g., science, social studies, foreign language) or skills developed that are not listed above.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT ITEMS	
1. Is the level of adult supervision appropriate to activity and age group?	<p>Mark YES if the number of adults in the room allows for safety, activity implementation, and individualized attention to youth.</p> <p>Mark NO if there are too few adults to ensure participant safety, to implement the activity, or to provide adequate support to individual participants; also mark NO if there are too many adults deterring youth interactions and/or leadership. Provide an explanation of the NO response in the space provided.</p>
2. Is the work space conducive to the activity?	<p>Mark YES if the physical work space is conducive to the group size and activity type.</p> <p>Mark NO if the physical work space has evident hazards, is not conducive to the group size, or is inappropriate for the activity type. Provide an explanation of the NO response in the space provided.</p>
3. Are necessary materials available and in sufficient supply?	<p>Mark YES if participants have an adequate supply of the materials/tools they need to make progress on tasks or activities, if the quality or condition of the materials is adequate (materials/equipment are in working order, not piecemeal or broken), and if activities/tasks can be completed with what is available.</p> <p>Mark NO if materials are in poor working condition, or if there is an inadequate supply, to the extent that the activity is not effective for youth. Provide an explanation of the NO response in the space provided, such as "Not enough instruments for all youth."</p>
SUMMARY RATINGS	
Skill-Building	Skill-building activities are content-driven and develop core skills. If youth are relying on skills previously learned to develop those skills and/or add new skills, that is skill-building. Skill-building can characterize any kind of learning, whether academic or non-academic.
Active Learning	Active learning engages youth dynamically with the content of learning, through dialogue, questioning, collaboration, youth-to-youth support, and by creating a product (paper, report, performance). Active learning opportunities can occur in both academic and non-academic activities. Active learning also includes competitive activities in which youth are collaborating or reflecting on how to be more successful competitors (e.g., math/science competition, sports competition). It could involve planning or completing such activities as a community service project, advisory groups, governance committees, events, etc.
Relationship-Focused	Relationship-focused activities build and sustain healthy adult-to-youth and youth-to-youth relationships. They include activities in which the adults engage in and strengthen positive relationships with individuals or the group. Evidence of this element would include personal discussions that are part of lessons or activities, exploring personal thinking and ideas among youth, or warm and supportive behavior that the leaders exhibit and/or encourage youth to exhibit.
Task-Oriented	When the activity is well enough organized that youth know what they are doing and why they are doing it, with or without the facilitator's direction, the activity is task-oriented. It is possible the observer does not actually observe the goals and purposes being communicated, but observers will see evidence that participants understand well what they are doing and why. Facilitators/adults might be circulating to check progress and understanding, or they may be keeping participants on task and in focus with encouraging guidance, questions, or suggestions. Participants are engaged.