OUT OF SCHOOL TIME
OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT
Adapted for Virtual Activities (OST-A) [1]

OBSERVER PROCEDURES

January 2021

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.

This document has been adapted from the original Policy Studies Associates OST instrument to address situations where virtually conducted (live, on-line) activities are being observed virtually, or live activities are observed through a video stream, or some students participate in a live activity through a video stream.

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, after the observation is completed, using notes as a guide.

■ **Environmental Context:** Items related to the adequacy of the learning context for the observed activity, including adequacy of supervision, space or virtual platform and functions, and materials.

■ **Observer's Synthesis:** Observer's syntheses of the activity and its overall quality

Sampling

Wherever possible, attempts should be made to observe a carefully selected, and sufficiently robust, sampling of activities designed to target 21CCLC student achievement and enrichment performance indicators. This means that the selected observations should be representative of the types of activities that the program offers to promote its achievement and enrichment goals.

It should be noted, however, that the instructions throughout this section represent *recommended* procedures, and depending on the scope of the program and the evaluation contract, are not always achievable. For example, true representativeness of selected activities often cannot be achieved in the limited number of observations possible, but selection of observed activities should strive to achieve this. Similarly, it will not always be possible to complete the whole Observation Matrix, it would not be possible (or necessary) to assess inter-rater reliability if there is only one observer, and it may not be consistent with the evaluation contract to conduct "22 to 26 observations," especially if there is only one observer

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 or log-in address.

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 observer should conduct, independently, 4 to 6 online and/or in-person OST activity observations, to the extent possible. Each observer/ observation 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 (including as a result of circumstances requiring activities to be conducted virtually), 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.

It should be noted however that these numbers of observations are intended as guidelines and may be difficult to achieve, particularly during a pandemic or other circumstances when most activities are conducted virtually.

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, observers 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, nonacademic or homework joint observation.

■ Observers 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 round of observations. 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 round of observations. 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 at least 15 minutes.**
>
> Observers may choose to remain longer if necessary to accurately rate the activity.

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. In a virtual environment, it is critical that the observer monitor the Chat box or equivalent (or save and review it after the observation) – whether or not the facilitator(s) are doing so – as an additional source of information, quotes and comments.

> **After completion of observation, while still in the
> activity setting (if appropriate), 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**
UNK = Presence of exemplar cannot be determined by observer[2]
NA = Exemplar is not relevant to the activity *and* its absence does not detract from the quality of the activity.

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 <u>underline</u> 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

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[2] Note that in many cases, especially (but not exclusively) in a virtual environment, an exemplar that is not apparent to the observer would also not be apparent to participants. For example, if the observer is logged in as a participant and is unable to see a document or display, it is likely that other participants also will not be able to see it. If the observer believes that to be the case, it is appropriate to give the exemplar a low rating.

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 four *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, other assigned independent work, or specially assigned skill drill. If youth participate in academic activities that are not independent work/homework, mark *Academic activities*. If youth are working on an in-depth, expanded academic assignment, but it *IS* independent work/homework, mark THIS category. Note that "homework" can include work that is assigned as part of a synchronous virtual learning activity if that work is to be completed independently.
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 *Sports* 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.
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.
Character Education/Youth Leadership	Activities designed to promote conflict resolution, drug prevention, violence prevention, truancy prevention and/or youth leadership.
Social-emotional development & learning (SEDL)	Activities specifically designed to improve social-emotional development, including Relationship Skills, Social Awareness, Self-Management, Self-Awareness, and Responsible Decision-making.
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 one location in this category that best applies to the setting in which the activity takes place. If "Other" is marked, specify the type of space used.
	On-line, one-on-one	
	On-line, Multiple participants	
	Gym	
	Computer lab	
	Library	
	Cafeteria	
	Auditorium	
	Art room	
	Music room	
	Hallway	
	Outside playground	
	Other	
PRESENCE OF STUDENTS	In-person	Students can only be present in-person if the activity is in-person/on-site. An activity conducted virtually on an on-line platform can only have students present virtually. However, an on-site activity might include both: some students present in on-site, and others participating via video conferencing platform.
	Virtual (on-line)	
	Via streaming video	
PRESENCE OF STAFF/FACILITATORS (For activities with on-site participants)	In-person	Some activities may include both, i.e.. a live, in-person activity that receives support from both an on-site facilitator as well as a staff/facilitator present on video.
	Via streaming video	
PRESENCE OF OBSERVER(S) (For activities with on-site participants)	In-person	Note that this distinction is only needed for live, in-person activities. Virtual activities (conducted through an on-line platform) can only be observed virtually.
	Virtually observed (e.g. via video stream)	
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.
	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. *Other professional* 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.
	Additional Unknown	In a virtual, on-line activity, there may be additional staff that cannot be identified – e.g. someone monitoring the chat box and only communicating privately with the primary facilitator(s).
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	
Grade Levels (Circle all that apply.)	**Grade levels 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**	e predominant way that youth are selected to participate in this activity.
	By interest (child's choice)	
	Assigned (e.g. by child's needs)	
	All attendees (in the program)	

COVER SHEET ITEMS (continued)		
Skill Development (Check one.)	**This is a homework/ assigned independent work 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 is intended 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 not intended 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(s) Targeted (Only complete this area if "Skillbuilding/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.
	Character Education/ Youth Development	Conflict resolution, drug prevention, violence prevention, truancy prevention and/or youth leadership
	Other SEDL skills	Social Awareness, Self-Management, Self-Awareness
	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. Indicate the type of activity and observation (check one): ___ In-person activity, observed in-person ___ Teacher and students in-person, activity observed on video ___ Virtual activity, observed via log-in	If this is an in-person activity observed on video: 1a Mark "Whole" if the video covers the whole class (all students) for the whole observation, whether or not the teacher is visible. Mark "Partial" if the whole class is visible only part of the observation. Mark "No" if not all students are visible during most of the observation. 1b Mark "Yes" if the teacher and any displays meant for the whole class are sufficiently visible to avoid loss of information. Mark "No" if any essential information that would be available to the students is not visible on the video. 1c Mark "Yes" if the video moves around the room in a way that improves the observer's understanding of the lesson. Mark "Partial" if there is movement that only sometimes improves the observer's understanding. Mark "No" if the movement does not meaningfully enhance observer's understanding, or if the camera does not move. 1d Mark "Yes" if observer is able to see everything necessary to understanding the lesson. Mark "No" if there is anything essential you cannot see, and specify.
2. Is the level of adult supervision appropriate to activity and age group?	Mark YES if the number of adults in the room allows for safety, activity implementation, and individualized attention to youth, OR for a virtual activity, if the platform, functions and strategies used enable adult facilitator(s) to effectively monitor student activity and provide individualized attention as needed. Note that in a virtual activity, individualized attention often needs to include attention to variations in students' technology skills, and may depend on whether or not students are also receiving adequate adult oversight where they are sitting. Mark NO if the above conditions relevant to the activity are not met; also 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.
3. Is the work space conducive to the activity?	Mark YES if the physical work space is conducive to the group size and activity type; OR for a virtual activity, if the platform, functions and strategies used enable all participants to understand and participate in the activity equally. Note that physical work space may also be relevant to a virtual activity, for example if students are asked to practice demonstrated dance steps at home in front of their monitor, they should have adequate available space at home. Mark NO if the physical work space has evident hazards, is not conducive to the group size, or is inappropriate for the activity type, and/or, for virtual activities, if students might not be able to hear or see the facilitator when necessary, or if the platform functions needed to participate create confusion. Provide an explanation of the NO response in the space provided.
4. Are necessary materials available and in sufficient supply?	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. For virtual activities, materials should be easily viewed and legible on remote screens, and can be directly accessed by participants, as needed, either through platform functions and/or opportunities for participants to download the materials, and that participants have both adequate technology and technological skills to accomplish these things. Mark NO if materials are in poor working condition, or if there is an inadequate supply, or not all participants are able to access the materials virtually, 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," or, "Only 1 or 2 participants had an opportunity to access and edit the shared concept map."

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, or popping in and out of break-out rooms, listening to discussions or asking students to show their work, 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.