

ASSESSING AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM PRACTICES TOOL (APT)

In June of 2003, the Massachusetts Department of Education, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) and the Massachusetts After-school Research Study (MARS), joined forces to create the Assessing After-School Program Practices Tool (APT). The development of the APT took place over a 15-month period, and included a review of research from the arts, education, and after-school literature, a review of existing after-school program observation tools and perspectives from experts in the field. The draft instrument underwent extensive field testing, reviews by a variety of experts including grantees, and reliability testing.

The Assessing After-School Program Practices Tool (APT) is a new instrument recently developed for use by Massachusetts 21st Century Community Learning Center grantees to compliment the Survey of After-School Youth Outcomes (SAYO) tool. The goal of the APT is to assess the extent to which after-school programs are implementing practices congruent with their desired SAYO outcomes. The APT is intended to be a tool that assists grantees with continuous program improvement and with identifying areas for professional development.

Field testing was conducted at 78 programs sites for the MARS study during the spring in 2004. While few studies explicitly examined causal relationships between specific after-school practices and individual youth outcomes, the result of this extensive review process indicated that the program features included in the APT are positively linked with the SAYO youth outcomes.

The APT is divided up into three main sections. Observers conduct observations and ratings using a four-point “how true” scale. Section 1, “Activity and Time Period Ratings,” includes ratings of arrival, snack time, transitions, pick up time, and homework time, as well as ratings of several activity times. Section 2, “Targeted SAYO Skill Building,” focuses on practices related to SAYO outcomes that are not covered in other sections, and is customized to reflect each grantee’s desired outcomes. Finally, Section 3, “Overall Program Ratings,” includes ratings of the physical environment, schedule, relationships, and the social-emotional environment. The APT also includes an opportunity for observers to provide overall impressions and collect information from the program director.

The APT is designed to help programs conduct self-assessments. The APT includes those program practices which research suggests are related to the outcomes measured by the Survey of Youth Outcomes (SAYO).

During FY05, 21st CCLC grantees piloted the APT at up to three program sites. All grantees provided the NIOST research team with feedback and suggestions for improvements that reflected on their experiences. The tool was then refined as a result. 21stCCLC grantees are required to implement the APT across all funded sites.

What does the APT measure?

- 1. Positive program climate** (Welcoming & inclusive environment; Staff positively & effectively managing and supervising youth behavior; High program and activity organization; Positive staff; Staff relationships)
- 2. Supportive staff: youth relationships** (Positive interest/interaction with individual youth; Emotional support provided; Respectful listening and responding; Abilities & interests encouraged; High expectations for behavior/performance)
- 3. Supportive peer relationships** (Peer cooperation; Mutual respect; Enjoyment/friendships; Conflicts resolved constructively)
- 4. Program practices that support youth’s individual needs and interests** (1:1 Time/Individualized Assistance; Communication between staff and schools/staff and parents around youth needs & interests; Youth choice, input & flexibility of programming)
- 5. Program practices that promote youth engagement and stimulate thinking** (Frequent staff and youth discussions; Recognition & feedback to youth; Opportunities to solve challenging or complex problems; Cooperative learning, Project-based and multidisciplinary activities; Time for reflection & peer discussion)
- 6. Opportunities for autonomy, responsibility & leadership** (Opportunities for leadership & decision-making; Youth autonomy and extended independent learning; Opportunities to build competence & meaningful skills; Opportunities to contribute to program, school and community; Opportunities to show-case work in culminating product or performance)
- 7. Other program features** (High participation rates; Group size and composition; Staff ratios and stability; Physical Safety; Parental support and expectations)