

# The Assessment of Afterschool Program Practices Tool (APT)

## *Findings from the APT Validation Study* **Executive Summary**



Allison Tracy, Ph.D.  
Wendy Surr, M.A.  
Amanda Richer, M.A.

**NIOST** National Institute on  
Out-of-School Time  
at the Wellesley Centers for Women

 **WELLESLEY  
CENTERS  
FOR  
WOMEN**

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the W.T. Grant Foundation for their generous funding and support for the *APT Validation Study*. Many individuals and organizations contributed to this study. We are especially grateful to our Research Associate, Ineke Ceder, for playing a crucial role in recruiting programs and helping to organize site visits and to our Research Assistant, Jillian Sherlock, for her many months of support to this study. We would particularly like to acknowledge and thank the administrators and staff from the 25 participating afterschool programs who dedicated their time and talent to the study and who graciously opened their doors to allow us to conduct observations at their sites, as well as to the youth who completed surveys as part of their site's participation. We would also like to thank the intermediary organizations that helped in the recruitment of sites for the study and in the provision of space for our training events: the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, the YMCA of Greater Boston, the Lowell Public Schools, and the City of Cambridge Department of Human Services. Finally, we would like to extend our appreciation to the *APT Validation Study* observers, the local APT coaches/consultants, and NIOST researchers and administrators who participated in the Fall 2011 APT Forum to hear preliminary results from the study, offer suggestions, and provide feedback for the next steps in our work.

### **Authors:**

Allison Tracy, Ph.D.

Wendy Surr, M.A.

Amanda Richer, M.A.

### **Suggested Citation:**

Tracy, A., Surr, W., & Richer, A. (2012). *The Assessment of Afterschool Program Practices Tool (APT): Findings from the APT Validation Study*. Wellesley, MA: National Institute on Out-of-School Time.

## Executive Summary

The Assessment of Afterschool Program Practices Tool (*APT*), developed by the National Institute of Out-of-School Time (NIOST), is an observational instrument designed to measure the aspects of afterschool program quality that research suggests contribute to the 21st century skills, attitudes, and behaviors youth need to be successful in school and the workplace. The APT is widely used across the country to support self-assessment and program improvement efforts. Increasingly, the APT is being used by external stakeholders for quality monitoring, assigning quality levels (e.g., as part of a Quality Rating and Improvement System), and identifying programs in need of improvement.

In 2010, with generous funding from the W.T. Grant Foundation, researchers from the Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College, conducted the *APT Validation Study*<sup>1</sup> with the aim of assessing the strength of the APT as a measurement tool. Based on observations of 25 afterschool programs serving grades K–8 in Massachusetts, this study provides scientific evidence that the APT possesses many strong technical properties. Among the study's many findings, researchers found that the APT captures key aspects of quality, such as whether a program is offering a welcoming environment or promoting youth engagement, which were found to be connected with positive youth program experiences and beliefs about themselves. APT ratings by a single observer are stable over time, which suggests that individuals can use the tool consistently to capture aspects of quality that are not overly sensitive to day-day fluctuations in practices. Practitioners do not tend to consistently rate their program higher or lower than outside observers who are unfamiliar with the program, suggesting that the APT can be used equally well by a variety of trained observers. Overall, the study suggests that the APT is an appropriate measure for examining afterschool program quality and is suitable for a number of lower-stakes purposes such as self-assessment and program support.

<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information about the methods and the results of the *APT Validation Study*, please visit [www.niost.org](http://www.niost.org).

# Implications for APT Use

The results of the *APT Validation Study* suggest that the APT can be used for a variety of purposes, by a variety of users, and in a variety of ways. The following table outlines the implications of study findings for these various assessment purposes. **Important note:** The *APT Validation Study* findings and implications for use assume that observers have undergone an intensive reliability training and have followed specific observation protocols.

Using APT for Self-Assessment & Program Improvement Support	
Implications for Use	Limitations/ Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programs can opt to use the APT by Activity Offering, Time of Day, Quality Area, or broad Quality Domain to examine quality and identify areas/activities in need of strengthening.</li> <li>• The APT ratings can be combined to create an Overall Quality rating for a site. Multi-site and intermediary organizations can use this rating to identify sites in need of support.</li> <li>• The APT ratings can be used to help programs prepare for monitoring or other external assessment visits.</li> <li>• A single, trained observer can gather consistent ratings for a program across multiple days.</li> <li>• Trained observer pairs or teams visiting a program on the same day can split up and observe multiple activities and staff to produce a more comprehensive picture of program quality.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is <u>not</u> recommended that the ratings for a single APT item be used for making program improvement decisions. Programs should conduct multiple observations and combine ratings for items before selecting specific practices to strengthen.</li> <li>• Observations of multiple activities are needed to help ensure a more accurate picture of a program’s quality for self-assessment and program support purposes.</li> <li>• The APT’s ability to measure true change over time has not been evaluated.</li> <li>• External observers may not be interchangeable from one visit to another. A consistent coach or Technical Advisor should be assigned to each site.</li> </ul>
Using APT for Monitoring & Assessment of Quality	
Implications for Use	Limitations/ Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ratings of Quality Areas, broad Quality Domains, and/or Overall Site Quality scores can be used for reporting trends in quality.</li> <li>• Quality scores can help stakeholders identify programs in need of support and strengthening.</li> <li>• Quality scores can be used as part of monitoring to help determine the extent to which programs meet desired quality benchmarks as part of a low- or moderate-stakes effort.</li> <li>• A consistent, trained assessor can gather quality data from a program across multiple days.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• APT ratings from a single site visit by a single observer <u>should not</u> be used for higher-stakes purposes.</li> <li>• Multiple visits and ratings of multiple activities are highly recommended for a more accurate picture of program quality when the APT is being used for monitoring and other moderate-stakes purposes.</li> <li>• External assessors may not be interchangeable from one visit to another. A consistent assessor should be assigned to each site.</li> </ul>