

## Odyssey of the Mind Team Formation **Common Considerations and Procedures**

The purpose of this handout is to share some thoughts from experienced program coordinators and coaches about considerations, options, and procedures which may be helpful to new program coordinators and others who help to form OotM teams. *NCOM Eastern Region does not endorse any particular method of selecting team members nor does it have any authority over team formation issues.* These decisions are made at the school or organization level. There is a diverse group of schools and organizations that sponsor OotM teams, and there are many methods for selecting teams. What works best for one group may not work for another.

I. **WHO SELECTS TEAM MEMBERS?** This may not be a question for small, close-knit, and/or experienced groups, but deciding who will select the team members often is the first or biggest question for new or larger programs. The answer likely will depend on the preferences of the organization's volunteers and on the traditions or evolution of the program. Some options are listed below.

- Coordinator-Managed. One or more coordinators (parent volunteer(s), school staff member(s), or a combination) compile information about interested students and coaches, and match them to form as many teams as possible.
- Coordinator-Facilitated. One or more coordinators (parent volunteer(s), school staff member(s), or a combination) compile information about interested students and coaches, and then share that information with parents and coaches who communicate with each other directly to form teams.
- Coach-Led. Volunteers willing to coach a team find interested students and communicate their rosters to the coordinator, or handle the administrative role themselves if not part of a group.
- Student-Led. Although most commonly seen with experienced high school students, sometimes the students themselves will form their team of friends and then find their own coach or seek help to identify possible volunteers.
- Any Combination. Some programs use multiple approaches.

II. **RECRUITING COACHES.** The number of students who can participate in OotM depends on the number of volunteer coaches you have. Finding enough coaches for all of the interested students can be the most challenging part of forming teams.

Coordinators often communicate the need for coaches on written materials sent home, on their OotM interest form (with a place for the parent to indicate their interest), on the group's social media or website, by word of mouth, or at OotM information meetings/club fairs/or other in-person events. Coordinators also often reach out directly to past coaches, parents of interested students, teachers, or even alumni. Some programs have a meeting just for prospective coaches. Many programs guarantee spots on teams for the children of coaches because this is a compelling method of persuading parents to volunteer.

Although coaches most often are parents or teachers, anyone who is committed, capable, and meets any screening process for your organization can be a coach. You may find grandparents, other family members, friends, or even community members who would enjoy coaching.

III. **COMMON CONSIDERATIONS IN SELECTING TEAM MEMBERS.** Whether you have many more interested students than team spots or you merely need to group students into teams with spots available for all of them, it may be impossible to articulate a precise formula for how teams will be chosen because of all of the potential variables. Those involved in selecting students often use a few or many of the considerations below.

A. Children of Coaches/Other Volunteers. As mentioned above, many programs guarantee spots on teams for the children of coaches. Some programs extend this incentive to parents who provide a team meeting space, or a tournament judge. Other programs treat OotM as a parent-cooperative activity which requires some volunteer commitment, big or small, from every family.

B. Coaches' Preferences. Coaches may be able to choose the students they want to coach, or share characteristics (grade level, motivation) of students whom they are willing to coach.

C. Schedules/Availability. The practical reality is that many team placement decisions are driven by the schedule preferences of the coaches and the availability of the interested students.

D. Experienced/New OMers. Some programs give preference to returning students because of their experience.

E. Team Continuity. Many programs strive to keep returning teams together, as long as they work well and want to stay together. Some programs prefer to have a balance of new and experienced students on teams, if possible.

F. Grade Levels. Some programs prefer to keep students in the same grade level, or within two grade levels, on a team, while other programs allow any combination of students as long as they comply with OotM division rules. Some programs give priority to older students, especially in the Primary division. As a result, some students may be chosen to favor more mature students, to keep the team members close in age, or to provide grade level balance on multi-grade teams.

G. Gender. Some programs may prefer single-gender or mixed-gender teams. More likely, however, programs end up with either single or multi-gender teams based solely on the ages and genders of the interested students that year. Some interested students may be chosen over others because they complete a single-gender team or provide gender balance for another.

H. Academics. Some programs consider students' academic suitability for OotM, whether that means working at or above grade level, AIG identification, a teacher's recommendation regarding the student's higher level thinking skills, or a coach's personal knowledge of the student's ability. Most programs do not rely on academic information about students to form teams, however, either because it is not available to parent coordinators/coaches or because they believe that students at all academic levels have gifts and talents which can be used and developed in OotM.

I. Behavior. Some programs consider a student's behavior, particularly if it may significantly disrupt a team's work. Parent volunteers may have limited information about a student's behavior at the time teams are chosen, however.

J. Location. Some programs consider the geographical proximity of the interested students if distance may make regular and/or extra team practices inconvenient. This is particularly relevant to homeschool groups and civic organizations, and possibly even some charter or private schools, whose students may be spread out across their county or several counties.

K. Long-Term Problem Interest. Programs may share the synopses or full long-term problems with interested students and try to form teams of students with similar preferences.

L. Student Skills, Abilities, and/or Working Styles. Programs may want to match students with complementary skills and abilities to maximize the team's assets. This may be more practical for groups who know each other well or for schools with experienced OMs.

M. School Personnel – Selection or Recommendations. In some programs, especially those in which OM is integrated into the curriculum, teachers and/or school administrators may select students with the academic ability and behavior necessary to work well on an OotM team, or they may do so randomly or on a first-come, first-served basis. If the selection is done by parent and/or teacher volunteers who aren't familiar with all of the interested students, current or former teacher recommendations may be helpful.

N. Friends/Siblings. Programs may attempt to place friends together, or separately, to promote good team dynamics. Programs may attempt to place siblings together for the convenience of their families, or separately to promote good team dynamics.

O. First-Come, First-Served. Programs may fill available team spots on a first-come, first-served basis, as long as all team members have compatible schedules and can commit to the team for the season.

While some of these considerations are more commonly used than others, there is no "best" formula – even for the same program year-to-year. The goal is to form teams that work well together and allow each team member to get the most out of their OotM experience.

IV. **TRANSPARENCY IN THE TEAM FORMATION PROCESS**. Regardless of what your program's OotM team selection process looks like, transparency is important. Parents who are new to OotM likely will be confused by all of the unknowns at the beginning of the process. With some advance thought and planning, you can tell parents at least which factors definitely will be considered, definitely won't be considered, and may be considered depending on the mix of interested students. As long as the process goes forward as explained and you are open to questions, everyone should accept the results.

V. **SUGGESTED PROCEDURES IN THE TEAM FORMATION PROCESS**.

For individual teams and small groups, the process of selecting team members can be very simple. Many established programs have team selection procedures, either formal or informal, that have been working for them and they don't need to mess with success. But for new programs looking for ideas or for programs that are dissatisfied with their procedures, below are some suggestions they may want to consider to make things run as smoothly as possible. Every program is unique; the key is to find what fits best with your volunteers and community.

1) Initial Planning. Identify who will be responsible for the OotM team selection process. This may be one person or a team. Decide what procedures and considerations you will use, and set a timeline so relevant dates can be communicated. If your program is not new, gather feedback and suggestions from last season's coaches and parents about the team formation process. If you are in a school setting, make sure your principal is in agreement and that you keep him/her in the loop as the process moves forward.

2) Communication. Choose the method(s) of communication you will use to let parents know about the upcoming OotM team selection process. Some available methods may include your school or organization's website, social media accounts, newsletter, bulletin boards, letters sent home in weekly folders, class presentations, or announcements at school/PTA events. Be sure you know who to contact and about any deadlines or rules for any of the options you choose.

3) Informational Meetings? Written communication and a contact number for questions are more than enough for many OotM programs, but others choose to schedule an information session for parents to ask questions and learn more about OotM. Programs may even host family events where interested students can do things like work on spontaneous problems, see examples of items built in previous years, and generally get a feel for whether OotM is right for them.

4) Involve Teachers? Even if your program does not require teacher recommendations for participation, you may want to consider asking teachers to recommend the OotM program to the parents of one or two of their students whom they think are particularly well-suited for it. Parents may get overwhelmed by all of the information that comes home from school, but a teacher's note about an academic opportunity that is sent specifically for their student is likely to be noticed!

5) Gather Information. Before you can put teams together, you have to know who is interested and gather all the information you will need. If your coordinator merely facilitates the process, you may only need the student's name, grade, and their parents' contact information so they can share it with the coaches. If your coordinator manages the process, you also will need the student's day and time availability for meetings, any volunteer roles the parents will take on, and any other information you need to sort and arrange possible teams. You may choose to create a paper interest form that parents can send back to school, or you can create and link to an online form, such as a Google Form, which will compile all of the responses into a spreadsheet for you.

6) Match Coaches and Team Members. In some years, all of the interested students and available coaches may fall perfectly into place. In other years, incompatible schedules and limited team spots may test *your* creative problem solving skills! Communicate with coaches about potential team rosters before they are finalized and announced.

7) Announce Teams. Be clear about whether the coordinators will communicate with parents of placed students about their team details or if the coaches will handle that. Communicate with the parents of students who could not be placed on a team, if any, as soon as possible.

VI. **GENERAL ADVICE**. The information provided in this handout was gathered from responses to an informal survey of current NCOME coordinators and coaches in March 2015, as well as insights and anecdotes shared by current NCOME board members. Below are some additional team formation issues raised and some advice echoed by many of those who responded.

1. Communicating/Understanding the Commitment. The problem of students and parents not understanding the time and effort expected of OotM team members was cited as one of the biggest obstacles to forming strong teams. In written materials and any in-person discussions or events, be sure to stress the scope of the commitment, including important dates, extra practices, the importance of attendance and work outside of meetings, and team volunteer needs. Check out the model Student/Parent Contract online. Some programs have introductory events or meetings, or don't discuss the long-term problem for the first few meetings so team members may drop-out and be replaced from a waitlist. Some programs require students to audition/compete for spots, or to complete an application with questions that gauge interest and motivation.

2. Asking/Requiring Parents to Volunteer. Many strongly advised asking/requiring all parents to volunteer in some capacity before their child is placed on a team, either as a coach, assistant/back-up coach, judge, or tournament volunteer, or by providing a location for regular/extra meetings, or as otherwise needed. Coaches need a lot of support and don't have time in January to beg parents to find or be a judge for their child's team!

3. Forming a Few Strong & Dedicated Teams is Better Than Trying to Place Every Student  
Despite the strong desire to place every interested student, several respondents advised against stretching your group's volunteer and student resources. Fielding more teams than your group can support can result in those teams struggling with attendance, participation, drop-outs, and students and coaches whose interests and personalities are not a great match for OotM.

4. Start Early Teams should not be discouraged if they aren't able to start meeting until late in the fall because there still will be plenty of time to be well prepared, but it is great to get going as early as you can. The long-term problems are published in July and available as soon as you purchase/renew your membership. You can prepare any informational materials in advance and start communicating about your program or team as soon as the school year starts.

5. Solicit Feedback and Be Open to Change. Even if you think everything is going well with your program, it is important to solicit feedback from coaches and parents every year. Know that your procedures may change, or need to change, in some ways as your group evolves.

Finally, as one OotM coordinator shared, know that ***there is no perfect system***. That is the truth!