

# OM – At a Glance

***Odyssey of the Mind*** (also called "OotM" or "OM") is an international educational program that provides creative problem-solving opportunities for students from kindergarten through college. Team members apply their creativity to solve problems that range from building mechanical devices to presenting their own interpretation of literary classics. They then bring their solutions to competition on the local, state, and World level. Thousands of teams from throughout the U.S. and from about 25 other countries participate in the program.

## ***What makes Odyssey different?***

Odyssey of the Mind is a competitive program, but it's nothing like your typical sporting event. The competitive element encourages kids to be the best that they can be, but it's a friendly competition. Kids learn from and even cheer on their competitors. Odyssey of the Mind is not a college bowl or a competition about knowledge. It's all about creativity, an often overlooked element in the growth and development of many students. Kids are rewarded more for how they apply their knowledge, skills and talents, and not for coming up with the right answer. In fact, in Odyssey of the Mind problems, there isn't one right answer. Ever.

## ***How do students benefit from participation?***

In Odyssey of the Mind, students learn at a young age skills that will last a lifetime. They work in teams so they learn cooperation and respect for the ideas of others. They evaluate ideas and make decisions on their own, gaining greater self-confidence and increased self-esteem along the way. They work within a budget, so they learn to manage their money. They see that there's often more than one way to solve a problem, and that sometimes the process is more important than the end result.

## ***How does it work?***

Schools or community groups purchase a membership and form teams of up to seven students. Each team chooses one of five competitive problems to solve. The problems appeal to a wide range of interests; some are technical in nature, while others are artistic or performance-oriented. Under the guidance of an adult coach, teams work on their solutions throughout the school year and, if they choose, present them in organized competitions in the spring. The "friendly" competitive aspect encourages students to be the best that they can be.

## ***What are the competition levels?***

In Texas, the first level of sanctioned competition is within a region. Teams who place are invited to compete at the State level. These championship teams are then invited to participate in the annual Odyssey of the Mind World Finals, where they compete with teams from countries around the world, including Canada, China, Germany, Hungary, Japan, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Malaysia, Poland, Singapore, and Uzbekistan. New countries join the program each year.

## ***How are teams judged in competition?***

Thousands of volunteers from around the world judge the competitions and serve in various positions to help make the tournaments a success. Teams are scored for their long-term problem solution, how well they solve a "spontaneous" problem on the spot, and "style" -- the elaboration of their long-term problem solution.

# OM COACH & TEAMS

## Who Can Coach?

Coaches come from all professions and from all walks of life. Although teams must have the support of the member school or organization, coaches do not have to be teachers. Frequently, a child's involvement in the program will generate the interest of the parents. Often, parents will start the Odyssey of the Mind program in their child's school and assume a coaching role as a way to get involved in their child's education.

## Role of the Coach

Coaches must remember that Odyssey of the Mind is a "hands-on" activity for students and "hands-off" for adults. It is important that teams create their solutions without the help of others. There is value in letting teams succeed and fail on their own merits, especially when achievement is rated on effort, as much as on results. You, the coach, will offer guidance and encouragement, and teach team members how to explore possibilities, listen to others, learn from failures, and evaluate solutions effectively. However, you are not to give the team ideas or solve the problem for it. You will be amazed at what students can do on their own and, in the end, you'll be proud they did it themselves. And the students will amaze themselves and build self-esteem from knowing they did it on their own.

As the coach you will provide supervision and handle logistics such as scheduling meetings, making sure paperwork is done properly, getting the team to competition, teaching them how to solve differences, and so on. You may be responsible for recruiting and selecting team members. You'll want to make sure the team understands the limitations of its long-term problem and oversee brainstorming and spontaneous practice sessions. When team members get an idea, you can make sure they obtain the skills required to carry out that idea. You'll provide moral support. And . . . if something goes wrong, the team might need to rely on your guidance to help them make things right without actually fixing the problem for them. Be sure to read and re-read the problem and clarifications. Make sure the team reads them as well and recognizes what is being scored.

## Forming a Team

It is important to recognize that all students can benefit from participation in Odyssey of the Mind, and that performance in the classroom does not directly correlate with success in the program. Many students have highly developed creative problem-solving abilities but do not have the opportunity to apply them in the classroom.

Participation in Odyssey of the Mind removes the apprehension and self-consciousness that may inhibit students from becoming more involved in the classroom. Students who are not high achievers often discover, through solving Odyssey of the Mind problems, that the knowledge attained in school can be applied to many real-life situations, and they become more involved in the classroom as a result.

There are many ways to form teams. Recruit as many students as possible, and ask them to specify their 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> choice of problem. Allow them to form their own teams – works well with older groups. In some cases, teams form spontaneously. Some school districts have

# OM COACH & TEAMS

rules as to who may do Odyssey. More often than not, it is more difficult to enlist a coach (teacher or parent), than to find interested team members.

It is a good idea to involve students with different skills and abilities, so the team has a wide talent base to draw upon. This helps to build teamwork, because the members will learn to recognize and appreciate the abilities of others. Whether you're trying to generate interest in the program or choosing from a well of eager students, here are a few suggestions on making that final decision of who should be on your team:

- Hold a creativity "play-off," where candidates are presented with problems that require creative thinking. Those who enjoy the activity will enjoy being on a team.
- "Compose" each team with a selection of students with varying skills – for example, an artist, musician, computer expert, writer – depending on the nature of the problem.
- For division I & II students, it is recommended not to span more than two grades.

Teams can be any number of members up to a **maximum of seven**. If a team member drops out at any time, he/she remains on the roster and the seven members' maximum still applies. If the team already had seven members, a new member cannot join as this would make it eight.

Although it is allowed, we recommend that you do not start a team with less than 5 members as they will be at a disadvantage against other teams.

When selecting which problem they wish to compete in, team members should read carefully the entire problem several times. Note: Houston has a restriction that a school must fill each problem in the membership before the school can register more teams under a second membership. See *Team Qualifications* on our website for full details. In schools with an established program, it is often the Odyssey of the Mind membership coordinator who organizes the problem selection.

## The Team Parents

It is always a good idea to hold an **initial meeting** of team members and their parents. Most likely, the parents will support their child's involvement in the program and will want to help. It is very important, however, that the coach lets them know their limitations; **makes clear the rules for outside assistance**; stresses that their children will reap the full benefits of creative problem solving if they create their solution themselves.

Parents need to understand what will be expected of them regarding money, time, transportation, and so on. Some coaches set-up specific jobs for parents such as transportation coordination, bringing snacks for meetings, finances, T-shirt and pin orders, setting up spontaneous, etc.

Discuss time constraints and what they're willing to contribute, set a schedule of team meetings that the coach will stick to as best as he can until the competition date approaches.

Parents may be willing to teach basic skills that team members need to execute their solution — carpentry, sewing, dancing, etc. Parents can also supply general information on subjects such as engineering and scientific principles, and they are a good resource to serve as judges, scorekeepers, or tournament assistants.

# OM COACH & TEAMS

## Divisions

- Primary Teams – Grades K-2. They present the non-competitive Primary problem at school or at tournament.
- Division I -- Grades K-5
- Division II -- Grades 6-8
- Division III -- Grades 9-12.
- Division IV -- Collegiate and adults.

## How do Teams Compete?

An Annual Membership from the Odyssey of the Mind HQ ("CCI") is required. It allows you to form up to 5 teams one in each of the problems, for each division covered by the school, plus an unlimited number of non-competing primary teams. Each team consists of one (or more) coaches and up to 7 team members.



Note: Texas sends the top 2 teams to World Finals, as well as Ranatra Fusca Award winners.

For a full explanation of the various rules, please see the *Program Guide*. It is available at under Coach Resources at [www.txodyssey.org](http://www.txodyssey.org).

# OM COACH & TEAMS

## What does it cost?

- A standard membership costs \$290 per year and covers *one team per problem per division* (typically up to 5 teams per membership, unless the school spans division such as a K-8 school). No limits on the number of Primary teams you can have.
- Tournament fee costs: \$115 *per competitive team*, \$45 *per primary team* for each tournament in Texas.
- Problem materials have a cost limit ranging from \$125 to \$145 *per team*.
- TX Odyssey merchandise is sold before or on tournaments days: T-shirts (~\$20 *each*) and trading pins (\$5-8 *per pin*). These are optional but as we are a non-profit organization, they represent a substantial income which helps keep our tournament fees low.

Overall, the participation cost for a competitive team starts around \$70 *per student*; and it goes down as schools yield more teams in their membership (5 competitive teams per division for the same membership)

## Team Qualifications for Regionals

To be qualified for the Region Tournament any competitive teams must meet all posted requirements and must complete the following general steps:

1. **Purchase/Renew** your annual membership online at the National website.
2. **Register Online.** Complete online TEAM registration as soon as team starts meeting and discussing the long term problem. Deadlines apply.
3. **Trained Judge.** Provide a volunteer who will be trained to judge teams in another problem (no conflicts). Requirements include specific training and advancement to State tournament..
4. Untrained **Volunteer** per Team: Each team must provide at least one untrained person to volunteer for 2-3 hours at the tournament.
5. **Tournament Staff** (TS): In larger tournaments memberships with four or more teams, supply additional volunteers to maintain consistency all day.
6. **Payment:** Tournament fee payment for Regionals must be received by mid-January.
7. **All Team Rule for Multiple Memberships:** In larger regions, each *membership* is required to fill every competitive problem per eligible division before purchasing a second membership from CCI.

## General Timeline

August:	Schools Purchase/Renew membership
September:	Orientation Meeting for Parents, Coaches and Coordinators
October:	Coach Training, teams start meeting weekly or bi-weekly
December	Deadline to register teams for regional tournaments
Jan/Feb:	Judge Training
Feb/Mar:	Regional tournaments (Houston, Central Region, North Region)
Mar/Apr:	TX State tournament (advancing teams from Regionals)
May:	World Finals tournament (advancing teams from States/Countries)

Educators who participate can obtain a certificate for 6 hours GT credit.

# TESTIMONIALS

This article was written by a long-time educator and Odyssey of the Mind director.

## *Educational Standards? They Don't Come Higher Than in Odyssey of the Mind*

*By Joanne Rompel, Illinois Association Director and Educator of Gifted & Talented*

In preparing to meet and exceed each student's needs to the best of our abilities, educators look at learning styles, standards, and student performance. Leaving no child behind is a national decree. "If it's not standard based it's not happening during our class time," is the cry. Educators have found that using Odyssey of the Mind is a way to extend creative experiences in a real work-world environment while aligning with national, state, and school standards.

The Odyssey of the Mind program is able to meld the state and national learning standards while extending academic challenges that employ the processing of thinking skills. Students are required to solve real-world problems in a creative venue designed to fulfill the requirements of the long-term problems offered each year.

The problems encompass the academic skills required by state and national curricula; they are cognizant of the academically talented and challenge students in a variety of genres. Without having to "learn through the seat of their pants," students learn by doing, moving, and sharing. They practice social skills through working in teams, negotiation through validating their ideas, and assessment through the use of their own and problem rubrics.

Educators delight in the thought that they can capture students' *aha!* as they discover new ideas, formulate hypotheses, test many solutions, and, as a team, decide on a final product based on an evaluation that keeps the target in focus.

Many school districts are experiencing serious cutbacks in fine arts and other classes for their special populations — both remedial and challenge groups. Odyssey of the Mind provides standard-based, goal-oriented curriculum experiences that are educationally solid in all subject areas while immersing students at various levels in the learning process.

Students are consumers of education. They are developing not only academically but also socially and skillfully. Specific tasks designed to practice their newly acquired skills are measurable;

growth is observable and can be accurately reported through the use of rubric (evaluation). Students learn the real work-world skills of defining the problem, developing many possible solutions, and establishing criteria to evaluate the process. They then decide, as a group, how to implement their solution in a creative way.

Not only do they learn what is required, they learn to budget time, resources, and materials to complete and "market" their "product" (solution).

While students across many grade levels receive the same long-term problems, the end product is always unique, and age and academically appropriate. The application of standard based learning at each age and skill level validates the educational value of the Odyssey of the Mind's creative, social, and interactive learning. Bringing standards to this program or bringing this program to the standards isn't the issue. In standards-based education we have goals. In Odyssey of the Mind, we have fun while learning and meeting those goals.

*'Odyssey of the Mind provides standard-based, goal-oriented curriculum experiences that are educationally solid in all subject areas ...'*

# TESTIMONIALS

Article by *Theresa Lundy* from *Sherwood Park Elem, MI*.

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## **Reflections of a First-Time Coach**

### **How Odyssey of the Mind Helped to Put My Life in Perspective**

**A**s I entered into my first coaching experience with Odyssey of the Mind, I often asked myself what I could possibly have been thinking . . . I had a team that consisted of:

- Three children with parents who spoke no English (Chinese, Vietnamese and Spanish)
- One child with severe ADHD
- One child who broke down in tears during EVERY practice
- Two children who were so painfully shy I did not hear their voices for one month
- Two children in the struggles of a bitter divorce
- One child who had a parent diagnosed with a life-threatening illness two days before a competition

Plus, my team fought non-stop for eight weeks. I did not know what I could possibly accomplish with these kids.

Well, the day of the competition, they pulled it all together and took 7th out of 14 teams. (They would have scored higher if it had not been for my misinterpreting part of the problem. Of course, that thought made me feel even worse!) I left the competition feeling pretty blue but thankful that it was over.

I always heard the little voice in the back of my head saying, “It’s the process, not the outcome.” It is hard for a coach to keep that in perspective. On the surface, I did not notice very much in the way of greatness during the process, and the outcome seemed disappointing. But, as I met with the kids at school on Monday and I looked back over the past three months I realized that the following had happened:

- The kids whose parents did not speak English (and had not lived in the country very long) were picked up by the coaches and were transported to the performance to watch their kids - we broke down a lot of cultural barriers trying to communicate with each other.
- The child with ADHD learned to interact with a team.
- The child who cried at every performance gained confidence and performed beautifully.
- The painfully shy kids were running around the competition laughing and interacting with other children.
- The parents going through the bitter divorces were at the competition enjoying their children’s performance – as a family.
- The child who had an ill parent spent the day with us and was thankful it took his mind off troubles at home.

The best part of the whole experience: On Monday morning, one of my shy kids asked, “Is this the end of Odyssey of the Mind? Am I really going to go the rest of the year without seeing you?”

I realized then that Odyssey of the Mind had made a huge impact. It was not the scores, it was not the performance, it was the process of getting there. It was the POSITIVE changes that I saw in all the kids. It put my life in perspective.

# NOTES