

Odyssey of the Mind growing in NPSD

A growing number of parents in the North Penn School District are finding time in their busy schedules to coach or support an activity called Odyssey of the Mind.

Odyssey of the Mind is a creative problem-solving program for students of all ages and abilities. Teams of students select from a list of five problems and develop a solution which they present in a tournament setting. For example, this year teams could write a skit that involves Shakespeare's "Hamlet," design a vehicle that shows emotion or tackle technical challenges involving weird science.

No matter what problem they choose, students will have to solve it completely on their own, without help from adults. In the process, they generate and evaluate ideas, use skills and knowledge learned in school and, most importantly, create something entirely original. Students must also learn whatever they need to know in order to create their solution: how to use a saw, how to propel a vehicle, what's the best glue to use with wood, who is Hamlet?

Although adult coaches cannot directly contribute to the team's solution, they can act as instructors, teaching necessary skills such as how to use a saw safely or as facilitators, asking thought provoking questions.

In 2005, six teams from two elementary schools represented the North Penn School District at the regional competition. This year, 29 teams representing eight elementary schools and two middle schools competed on March 17 at Southern Lehigh High School in Center Valley. Just six years ago, 35 students participated in the program. Today more than 200 students are learning about creative problem-solving as part of North Penn's Odyssey of the Mind program.

Why are more and more parents making time for this extracurricular activity?

"I coach an OM team because

I feel it gives the children on the team an understanding of what it's like to work in the real world," says Penndale parent Gene Tung. "It's important to learn how to work within a team to solve a problem and give thoughtful consideration to the ideas of others."

Still other parents feel that the focus on standardized testing has diminished opportunities for creative expression in the classroom.

"My youngest son once used a cooking metaphor to describe school," explains Kate Early, a veteran Odyssey of the Mind coach and Penndale parent. "In school," he said, "we always have to cook from a recipe. We're never given the basket of ingredients and allowed to create a dish on our own." Odyssey of the Mind is all about the basket of ingredients and figuring out how to make your own dish. It's about taking creative risks, learning from failure, and succeeding through perseverance."

Creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson, popular for his dynamic lectures on education at the 2006 and 2010 Technology Education and Design (TED) Conference, advocates for "personalized learning" environments. Many parents view Odyssey of the Mind as a small-scale learning environment where children can be creative and develop their individual talents while learning how to work with others. The "personalized learning" that Robinson champions is made possible in this environment.

"Perhaps one of the best aspects of Odyssey is that all types of learners can benefit from and contribute positively to the final solution," says Alex Chiu, who coaches a Montgomery Elementary team. "Odyssey teams teach the children that there are all types of talents, and that when they come together, there is a wonderful result. Where one member may be naturally artistic, another may have the know-how to solve mechanical

issues. Likewise, a team member who is a natural thespian plays his or her important role in front of the audience where another's backstage presence is equally important to the end result."

It's no wonder that North Penn's Odyssey of the Mind program continues to grow. More and more parents recognize the need for cultivating creative thinking along with proficiency in math and reading. They believe strongly that providing opportunities to engage in real-world innovation, to learn and practice divergent thinking, and to develop the communication and social skills necessary for collaboration is crucial if our students are to be equipped as problem solvers.

Ken Watanabe, management consultant and author of *Problem Solving 101* wrote in his book, "It's important to realize that being a problem solver isn't just an ability; it's a whole mind-set, one that drives people to bring out the best in themselves and to shape the world in a positive way. Rather than accepting the status quo, true problem solvers are constantly trying to proactively shape their environment. Imagine how different our world would be if leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Roosevelt Franklin, JFK and Steve Jobs lacked this attitude."

Every student who participates in Odyssey of the Mind might not become a world leader or a business mogul but nonetheless they will be faced with issues that will challenge them as problem solvers. Odyssey of the Mind prepares these students to find creative, unconventional solutions and empowers them to take on the challenges of their schools, their communities and perhaps, one day, even the world.

For more information about North Penn's Odyssey of the Mind program, please visit the district website at www.npenn.org.

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