



“Key to Successful First-time National Choir Participation” by Keira Brown

Have you ever thought wistfully about sending students to the OAKE National Choirs? I contemplated it for years, and I'm proud to say I finally brought students to Denver for the 2008 National Children's Choir. If I can do it, anybody can! It's not too late for you to have participating students in the National Choirs at OAKE's 2009 National Conference in Washington, DC.

The basic eligibility requirements and audition information will be posted on the OAKE website soon, and are simple enough. So why didn't I take advantage of this opportunity for my students sooner? Like you, I needed to work out the details in these areas: The Timeline, Administrative Support, Parent Trust, Student Preparation, and Finances.

The Timeline – Be Prepared:

Because audition tapes are due the **second week of October**, you'll need to be ready to hit the ground running with students and parents as soon as school starts, which means ensuring your OAKE membership is current, and obtaining administrator buy-in over the summer, or at least **late August**. (I do tend to ask permission, not forgiveness; if that's not how you operate, you may disregard any mention of administration!) During the **first weeks of school**, you need to select students and inform parents of the process. Next is the easiest part if you have selected the right students, preparing the audition tapes/CDs and mailing them along with completed application forms by **October 10**. Then comes the hardest part, waiting to find out whether they all made it! (Of course they will.) That will happen by **mid-November**, and then music is mailed out by **mid-December**. Over the **winter** you will work with your participants on their music, check with parents to be sure their registration process is going smoothly, and then register yourself to attend the **2009 Conference in Washington, DC, March 12 – 14**. (Students arrive and begin rehearsing by March 11.)

Administrative Support – Selling It:

I approached my principal about student participation a few weeks before school. I already had the basic timeline figured out (see above!), a listing of approximate dates and the previous year's dates, a sample parent letter, and a plan for student selection. We discussed the fact that March is CMT month, which matters more to some administrators than others. (If the issue comes up, be sure to remind your principal that your participating students will have many make-up days to finish CMT's when they return from D.C.) I was then asked to propose this plan to the superintendent, and finally the Board of Education; with any luck you won't need to go that far. Your principal knows and appreciates your teaching style and hopefully has already heard of Kodály, KESNE, or OAKE; this will help as you ask to take students out of state, missing three school days. Another point to make to your administration is that the cost of the trip and the travel/accommodation planning is a parent obligation (although you may follow up on fund-raising and scholarship opportunities.) And yet another major selling point is that every child attending is required by OAKE to be accompanied by a parent, so there is no need to recruit chaperones.

Student Preparation, Part I - Selection:

The first full week of school, I was auditioning 5th graders for Select Chorus participation, so I decided to go easy on myself and work only with a subset of those students for National Choir, rather than involving students from 4th and 6th grade as well. In the future I will probably branch out to include 6th graders, who audition for the Youth Choir. I noted the students who sang best in tune and had the best

accuracy in echoing tonal patterns, and came up with six students, the limit for each teacher for Children's Choir. The objectivity of this formal audition process pleased my principal. You may be able to invite students based simply on your knowledge of their singing voice through class and chorus. Of course, you will also be thinking about the students' motivation and behavior, as well as the level of parent support you have seen demonstrated. This process relies heavily on parent investment, and you will be creating headaches for yourself if you have a student audition whose family is not prepared to make that investment.

Parent Trust – Selling It Again:

In dealing with parents as well as with principals in your inaugural National Choir year, you have to be a salesman. Parents need to know why they should make such a major financial commitment, and need to be assured that it will be a valuable, enjoyable, and well-organized experience. One aspect that makes this a bit difficult the first time around is the fact that they are required to commit to participation, should their child be selected, *on the application* that you submit with the audition CD in October. That means they're saying they'll participate even before they know whether their child will be accepted, which can be a sticking point for some families. So you have to familiarize parents up front with the entire National Choir process as well as with the National Choir audition process.

I sent a sealed letter to parents of the students I selected and asked them to introduce the idea with the students rather than me – I didn't want to give any students false hope if their parents were not going to be on board. In the letter, I gave parents the following information:

- how I selected their child
- the approximate timeline
- a copy of the previous year's Conference schedule for the Children's Choir
- location of the Conference, including the performance venue and the hotel
- registration costs and approximate travel/accommodation costs
- information about the audition process
- scholarship information

Besides the letter, we also met one evening to discuss the parents' questions and concerns. Although I had been to three previous National Conferences, I wasn't able to answer some of the parents' specific questions about the National Choir student experience, so I found a parent in a nearby town whose children had attended in the past and was willing to answer questions from the parent perspective. (Thanks, Donna!) I asked them to make a commitment by the last full week of September, which gave them about two weeks to make a decision, and then gave the students and I two weeks to work on their CDs.

Student Preparation, Part II – Audition CDs:

The participating students rehearsed with me at recess two days a week, four days total, and then they each came in separately before or after school to record. Preparing the auditions was relatively easy. The most important part is making sure you have followed OAKE's directions to the letter – for example, give starting pitches only; whether using piano, pitch pipe, or voice (a new option this year) don't play (or sing!!!) along with your student's part. For Part C, the solfege exercise, you give only one starting pitch, and then play the chord pitches your student is NOT singing. Make sure your tapes or CDs include all sections, in order. Make sure your students' application forms are filled out completely – they will be disqualified for missing something as seemingly inconsequential as T-shirt size. I had always wondered if the OAKE judges had any kind of practice like: taking at least one singer from every teacher, trying to spread out the accepted students geographically, etc. It turns out the judges do not have time for that! The singers' tapes and CD are judged purely by performance, using a fairly simple and standard rubric, evaluating each of the three sections separately on: intonation, purity of vowels, steady beat/tempo, even tone throughout range, clarity of consonants, technique and rhythm, and interpretation. (The last three are only for "America the Beautiful.") Intonation is the most important category; for each section, it is worth 10 points while all other categories are worth 5.

Finances - \$\$\$\$\$...?:

OAKE offers a scholarship that can help toward National Choir participation, downloadable from www.oake.org; enriching the ethnic diversity of the choir and demonstrating financial need are requirements. KESNE also offers scholarship assistance – contact Tim Brandt, treasurer, for more information. At my school, the Music Boosters paid my students' application fees, and our School Activity Fund paid their participation fees. My administration felt that it should be the parents' responsibility to provide for their own transportation and lodging expenses, and frankly, my students' parents could afford it. But if your singers need more help, there are fundraising options that do not involve selling useless or fattening items; your students could write letters to community organizations asking for donations, perform a benefit concert with the help of local adult talent, or rake neighbors' leaves or perform other services in exchange for donations. Once you publicize that this is the first time singers from your school have been accepted into this elite performance experience, your school community and community at large will want to show their support.

Student Preparation Part III – The Repertoire:

This is the part you have done many times before – teaching students music to perform. The differences are that this music is tougher than our school choirs generally perform, there is a lot of it, someone other than you will be directing them and making interpretive decisions and gestures, and you're working with a small number of children who may all be singing different parts. From the time we received our music in December until the week we left for the conference in March, my students worked with me once a week during their recess, my lunch. If you are not allowed to work with students at recess, you'll need to ask your administrator to demonstrate support by helping you find time during the week for rehearsal, as the students must have their music memorized by the time they arrive in D.C. and most of them can't learn it without you!

My students who participated in the Denver National Children's Choir loved every minute and became the best of friends. Midway through the conference, their parents started asking me about next year! The students, who had earned minor celebrity status in our school, came back to Connecticut energized and eager to share ideas they had learned, and led warm-ups in chorus rehearsal based on warm-ups they had learned in Denver. And the parents came back awed at the caliber of the final performance, glowing with pride, talking about the experience with other parents, and advocating Kodály teaching and our music program in general. I know the second year will be easier, not only for having gone through the process once, but also because the administration, students, and parents understand the purpose and value of the National Choir experience for our students.

At our first KESNE workshop in September, KESNE secretary, Meredith Napolitano, the Children's Choir chairperson for the past five years, will be on hand to discuss National Choir. We here in New England are fortunate to have her as a resource, as well as Diana Brandt, KESNE past-president, who has also been involved with the National Choirs and judging. Both are willing to answer questions via e-mail before the September workshop in order to help you on the path to National Choir; you can find their addresses on the KESNE website.

If you have not brought singers to National Choir in the past, this is the year to begin! This conference in Washington, D.C. promises to be an excellent one for you as an attending teacher, AND it is in our neck of the woods - it won't be this close for another 4 years. It will be a great conference to promote to parents and principals, due to relative ease of travel for singers' families. See you (and your students) in D.C.!