Grouping Runners

Disclosure: Working with high school runners and teams I have always had anywhere from 30-90 runners, usually boys and girls, and always a range of times over 20 minutes in duration for a 5K. I have also had only a few assistant coaches with which to bounce ideas off or work with so most everything I have learned is by trial and error or talking to as many other coaches as I can.

I believe deeply in grouping runners as I try to make sure each runner gets individualized training and has a support group surrounding them. High schoolers (and for that matter middle schoolers) are social and if they believe in their group you will get more minutes, miles, and effort out of each one.

There are always a few problems which occur when grouping runners; disagreements between them, a strong personality, a person who always breaks off, a bad or negative attitude, and the list goes on. I usually find that, talking to the group as a whole and then the individual solves most of the problems. When this does not work you as a coach must decide what is best for the program. This might involve talking with the runner and parents, having the runner with you on runs, use different routes, have them become a manager, or in some cases removing them from the team. Whatever creative way you make it work that helps you make it through the season. This is the hard part that has no fixed solution and is up to the coach to do what they see as best.

This is how I group my runners.
I create a spreadsheet (excel as I always copy and paste it into google later with a few changes) with all their names. Then I create columns with their times and sort fastest to slowest. I then subdivide groups into 20-25 second groups. An example: 16:00-16:20 Group 1, 18:31-18:57 Group 2, etc. I then subdivide again based on years running (not actually grade or age). This gives me my starter groups. Now I might have runners alone as no one fits their subgroup that is fine and I do not worry. I also sometimes have big groups so I just divide these up. This gives anywhere from 10-20 groups with anywhere from 1-5 runners per group. Side note is when I have coached both boys and girls I do not put them in gender specific groups. Wherever group they end up in that is where they run.

Now creating runs and workouts off each group is a process where I use my sheet and watching my runners. I try to put everyone with someone. I am flexible and I try to put them in the best possible situation. Sometimes they do run alone as I have no one either that fast or slow to put with them.

Thus a normal week looks like:
M – Group
T – Flexible – run with who you want (within reason and this is communicated)
W- Group
H – Group
F – Flexible
S – Group
S – If applicable Flexible

The key to make it all work is communication. I talk to my runners about why they are in that group and the importance of running in your group.

Changing Groups:
I do change the groups up based on how each runner is progressing. Some of your newer runners will make jumps and greatly decrease their time. A rough estimate is after each race (or two/three track races) or two weeks I redo all the groups. This maximizes the effort the runner is putting in and allows the group to hopefully run faster. It also allows adjustments for sickness, stress at school/home, or the many other things the runners have going on in their lives.

Distance Track
I do the same thing for distance track with the following exception.
I group all runners the same at the start of the track season (for me that starts sometime in November or December depending on post state cross country). They stay in these groups until I break them apart towards the end of January or early February into their events (800, 1600, 3200). This is usually only for the top groups (about top 3 or 4) and the others stay in their groups (still adjusting on schedule) as I focus them on the 1600. I have found getting the newer runners or the ones that will not make the top 3-5 (region or big invites) in an event are better served by focusing on the 16. They usually make bigger jumps in the fall and then the spring.

Communication
When I have all my groups set and it is time for the runners to see their weeks and groups, I copy my Excel spreadsheet in a google sheet. I do mix up my groups so group 1 on my sheet is never group 1 on the public sheet. I also usually make up a name for each group (like team alpha wolf strike – thanks Shrek). This sheet can be viewed and edited by anyone on the team (including parents) so by mixing up the groups it gives less emphasis to the top group and makes everyone feel a part of the program.

It seems very time consuming but once you have the spreadsheets created and the groups set the first time each season then you are just moving a few runners each two weeks or so. This way you are very close to individualizing each runner's training and making sure you provide the best situation.