Technology Alliance Announces Second Annual Youth Apps Challenge
Contest engages students and teachers across the state, using mobile app-building to inspire passion for computer science education and careers

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 9, 2014

SEATTLE – Some of the world’s top computer-related careers are located in Washington, but few are held by graduates of the state’s K-12 system. Offering additional computer science classes in schools is only part of the solution. Inspiring students to take interest in the subject, and training teachers to teach it, is just as vital. Complimenting such efforts as Code.org’s Hour of Code, the Technology Alliance – a coalition of leaders from Washington’s top tech companies and research institutions – today announced the second annual Youth Apps Challenge, coinciding with the state’s Computer Science Education Week events.

The Youth Apps Challenge engages teams of middle and high school students from across Washington – challenging them to plan and build apps for smartphones and tablets – and offers free training to teachers in an accessible apps-focused curriculum that educates and inspires students. Student-made apps and app ideas are then submitted from April 1-10, 2015. Industry experts from such organizations as University of Washington, Microsoft, and Amazon judge the entries, and finalists are selected to attend an awards ceremony and showcase in their region.

Last year over 300 students participated in the contest, and over 100 teachers have been trained in the Youth Apps curriculum. Teachers report that the competition is attracting students who otherwise are not involved in computer science, providing an ideal entry point to the subject. The competition creates a sustained focus on the subject, complimenting shorter awareness-building efforts such as the Hour of Code.

“Students use tablets and smartphones for everything, but when you mention computer science, many don’t think it’s relevant,” says Earl Bergquist, a teacher at Garfield High School in Seattle, who helped over 30 students participate in the contest last year. “Down the road, they don’t think they’re going to use traditional computers, and they’re probably right. Connecting the subject to the mobile devices they use every day is a great idea… Excitement-wise, I’ve had several students disappointed we haven’t started preparing for the latest competition yet. They’re anxious to get started."

Kathy Stordahl is a computer literacy teacher at Ellen Ochoa Middle School in Pasco, WA. The population of this Eastern Washington town is mostly low-income, she says, and not many students considered themselves as future candidates for tech jobs. The Youth Apps Challenge is already changing how some students view their career prospects, she says, with almost 50 students participating last year.

“We’re a high poverty school, and this computer literacy is opening up options for students that they never thought about,” says Stordahl. “Now we get to discuss the job opportunities, the money you can make (in tech), and going to college to do that. We’re very excited to do the competition again this year… I’m hoping someone down the road will come back to Pasco and say, ‘Hey, I got into computer science because of what I did here in middle school.’”
In the competition, teams must generate an original app idea that addresses a real-world issue, identify user profiles and market potential, and pitch their app to an audience. More advanced students may also generate a working prototype of their app idea. Prizes will be awarded to numerous teams in each region, including tablets, visits to local technology companies, and more.

“Some skills you just can’t learn from a textbook, you have to learn by doing it,” Governor Jay Inslee says. “This is an exciting way for students to get creative, be innovative and put their ideas to practical use. I’m very excited to see what these teams can do.”

To expand the computer science pipeline in schools, the Technology Alliance offers the Youth Apps curriculum and other resources to educators free of charge. The featured curriculum was developed by the U.K.-based organization Apps for Good and adapted by the Technology Alliance for use in school, after school, or as part of a summer program. The curriculum is aligned with Computer Science Teaching Association standards and the Common Core standards for math.

Nearly 50 schools and education organizations across the state were trained in the Youth Apps curriculum last year. Many more have been trained since the first competition ended last spring.

“More Washington students should have the opportunity to engage in our vibrant technology economy,” said Susannah Malarkey, executive director of the Technology Alliance. “By participating in the Youth Apps Challenge, students learn to be not just consumers of technology, but to be creators. They will learn how to solve real-world problems and have fun in the process.”

Teams can begin working on their entries immediately, and may submit them between April 1 and 10th. Educators can learn more about the Youth Apps Challenge, and how to offer the Youth Apps curriculum at their school or organization, by contacting Technology Alliance at apps@technology-alliance.com or 206-389-7320.

For more information, visit www.technology-alliance.com/stemchallenge/youthapps.html.

CONTACT:
Drew Atkins, Technology Alliance
drew@technology-alliance.com
206-389-7320

About the Technology Alliance:
The Technology Alliance is a statewide coalition of leaders from Washington’s top technology-based businesses and research institutions. Non-profit and non-partisan, we are united by our vision of a vibrant innovation economy that benefits all of our state’s citizens. Our work is organized around the drivers of Washington’s long-term competitiveness: an educated workforce, strong research capacity, and a robust entrepreneurial environment. Through programs, events, data analysis, and policy activities, the TA advances 21st century education, innovation, and economic prosperity for our entire state.