

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 10, 2026

Contact: Rachel Anderson | randerson@piper-communications.com



Alcoa Students, Murfreesboro Teacher Win State Championship of Presidential AI Challenge

Regional finalists announced on April 16 will showcase projects in Washington, D.C.

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. - The White House officially announced Tennessee's [2026 State Champions](#) of the Presidential AI Challenge. Students from Alcoa Intermediate School (AIS) and a teacher from Murfreesboro City Schools advanced to the regional level, presenting their projects to judges this week.

In the Fall of 2025, the White House called on young innovators and educators to apply for the [Presidential AI Challenge](#), and Tennesseans rose to the occasion in a big way. The goal? Solving real-world problems facing our communities using AI-powered solutions. [AI Tennessee](#), an initiative led by the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UT), assembled UT professors and expert collaborators from across the state to mentor K-12 students and teachers, supporting their project research and development by providing access to AI tools to help curate their ideas and polish their final submissions.

“Kids are curious about AI, and must learn not only how to use AI, but also how to evaluate it critically and understand its limitations for high-impact careers in tomorrow’s workforce,” said [Anne Ho, PhD](#), AI Tennessee’s Director of AI Research Development. “The Presidential AI Challenge allows for unique engagement, piquing student curiosity and encouraging creativity with the goal of AI innovation for the common good.”

Alcoa Intermediate School students, ranging from grades 3-5, won Tennessee’s Elementary School level of the competition for their project “Homework Helper,” an idea for an app that could provide guidance for students struggling to stay on task or who do not have a parent or guardian available to help them with after-school assignments.

“First, you would type your problem in the app. Then AI would analyze the problem. Instead of just giving the answer, AI would ask leading and guiding questions to help the student along the way,” states the project submission, compiled by the student’s teacher at AIS, Hope McDonald,

and Emily Holtz, PhD., Assistant Professor of Elementary Education at UTK. “If the student is still stuck, AI would give suggestions or lessons on how to solve the question.”



The students presented the “Homework Helper” project at the regional competition held in Alcoa on Saturday, April 4. There will be a live webinar on April 16th to announce the finalists who will showcase their projects in Washington, D.C. in June.

The winner of Tennessee’s Teacher category was [Ashlee Barnes](#), a fourth-grade teacher at Black Fox Elementary School, with faculty collaborators from Middle Tennessee State University, Ryan Seth Jones and Keith Gamble. Barnes’ submission was the STEAM Compass: an AI-powered planning partner that helps teachers design vertically aligned, hands-on science lessons that address key standards and draw on locally relevant science phenomena. Barnes built a prototype to prioritize locations, issues, and community partners in and around Murfreesboro, TN.

“This experience fundamentally changed my own understanding of AI in education,” said Barnes. “I began this project with no prior experience in creating AI tools and very little awareness of what that process could look like in a classroom setting. Through this work, I not only learned how to design and implement AI-driven tools, but also how to align them intentionally to support student learning.

Teams that advance to the final competition could win up to [\\$10,000](#) and a trip to Washington, D.C. to showcase their work at the national level.

For more information about AI Tennessee and the initiative's additional research projects across the state, contact Rachel Anderson at 734-693-7009 or randerson@piper-communications.

About AI Tennessee

AI Tennessee's mission is to position the state of Tennessee as a leader in the global data economy. AI Tennessee is led by the University of Tennessee and promotes the state's unique strengths and opportunities in artificial intelligence. AI Tennessee's goal is to make lives better through artificial intelligence, research, education, and application.

###