

# NONPROFIT PUTS TECHNOLOGY IN THE HANDS OF STUDENTS

Sarah Dohl, vice president of communications,  
Junior Achievement of Greater Washington,  
says technology enables deeper learning.

Junior Achievement USA  
deploys tablets to further  
improve a popular and  
effective personal finance  
and budgeting program for  
students across the country.

## At a Glance

**ORGANIZATION:** Junior Achievement USA

**LOCATION:** Colorado Springs, Colo.

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 1,400

**TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT TEAM:** 25

**SUMMARY:** Established in 1919, Junior Achievement USA is the world's largest organization dedicated to educating K–12 students about workforce readiness, entrepreneurship and financial literacy through experiential, hands-on programs. The nonprofit organization reaches more than 4.6 million students per year in 201,444 classrooms and after-school locations. Nearly 220,000 volunteers, including businesspeople, parents, college students and retirees, support JA programs.

For nearly 100 years, Junior Achievement USA has been successfully teaching America's school-aged children the finer points of effectively managing money, building businesses and excelling in the workforce.

"We have worked very hard to earn the respect of the educational community," says Sharon Lents, vice president for field program services at Junior Achievement USA (JA). "It's one of the reasons we're able to reach so many classrooms and diverse student populations across the U.S."

Junior Achievement's unique curriculum, which features hands-on, experiential coursework, job shadowing, entrepreneurship training and career days at local businesses, has only become more popular since integrating the latest mobile technology.

The nonprofit organization, based in Colorado Springs, Colo., reached more than 4.6 million students in the 2014–15 school year, in large part because its staff continuously fine-tunes content and adds new programs and activities to meet the ever-evolving learning needs of its audience.

Much of that evolution involves leveraging technology to deliver education in the classroom — meaning JA has to investigate how to best incorporate it into its own teaching methods. However, JA officials weren't interested in implementing technology for the sake of implementing technology, explains Susan Luu, JA's senior vice president for business improvement.

"We're a successful organization, and we have earned the respect of educators across the U.S. We are not incorporating technology just to look hip and be trendy,"



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— Sharon Lents, Vice President for Field Program Services, Junior Achievement USA



she explains. "Our questions were always around: Can our curriculum be made even stronger using technology? Can it make our programs better?"

## Educational Engagement

In 2014, the organization decided that mobile tablets could make a difference with JA Finance Park, a popular and effective program. JA Finance Park, launched in 2003, teaches students the fundamentals of personal finance and budgeting through multiple lessons in the classroom and

concludes with a simulated, experiential "day in the life of an adult" at a dedicated JA Finance Park facility or mobile unit.

Initially, students attending the simulation used pencil and paper to work their budgets. This approach, while effective, often left students more worried about calculating math problems than focusing on how their financial decisions will affect their cash flow and lifestyle, according to Lents.

"It was very often a heads-down kind of activity," she explains, "where they're writing out problems, trying to figure out percentages, doing a lot of addition and subtraction and then, if they decide they need to go back in their budget and make a different decision, they're erasing and refiguring. It was a stressor for both students and the adult volunteers working with them."

JA officials decided to digitize the budgeting process by creating a custom application that could be deployed on tablets. They worked with CDW, a long-time supporter, to help them choose the right products for their requirements, provide the best possible price and get the tablets to each of the 26 participating Junior Achievement offices, known as JA Areas, when they were needed.

"We were in a unique situation where we needed to make our purchase en masse, but our JA Areas were going to be deploying the technology on their own schedule," Luu says. "CDW was a great partner in that they were able to hold our inventory and ship it out in whatever partials were needed when they got the call from each of our offices. They were just a really great partner in working with us through every aspect of this and making it easy and smooth."

## Real-World Experience

JA Finance Park currently reaches about 265,000 middle and high school students, or approximately 5 percent of its total audience, and is offered by 29 of 113 JA affiliates around the country.

However, the program has quickly become "the bright shiny penny" of JA offerings because of its impact on students, says Sarah Dohl, vice president of communications for Junior Achievement of Greater Washington, which puts nearly 25,000 students through the JA Finance Park program each year.

Much of the attention is the result of the program's grand finale: the "budgeting" simulation, which allows students to put into real-world practice the concepts they've learned in their teacher-led classroom work.

Assisted by volunteers and representatives from local companies, the students do research and then walk through a mock mini city of realistic banks, car dealers, government offices and retail outlets, where they apply for loans, make purchases and pay bills.

## The Power of Technology

Technology has proved to make the learning process more engaging, but for Junior Achievement's JA Finance Park program, it also:

- Brings a fun factor to what can be an arduous and difficult topic
- Allows users to move at a more personalized pace
- Provides more consistency in what students hear and are taught across varying JA Areas
- Creates an easier way for the organization to collect and measure results and determine if, and what kind of, impact has been made
- Makes the budgeting exercise closer to real life — increasing the likelihood that the experience and the information will stick with participants.

The goal is to create and manage their budget without going into the red — and, as in real life, it's not nearly as easy as it looks, admits Dohl.

"It's very hands-on and experiential, which helps students really get the concepts we're trying to teach," she says, noting that the Washington office just opened a second JA Finance Park facility and will open a third in 2017.

JA officials realized that by digitizing the experience they could empower students to really think about the impact of financial decisions. "We saw that technology could help enable a deeper conversation around that goal and move them more in a direction where they were using their critical-thinking and problem-solving skills," says Lents.

With a generous donation from KPMG, JA programmers developed a custom application that digitally mimicked — and improved upon — the JA Finance Park budgeting simulation. Students create an avatar and can see full-color pictures of cars and houses available for purchase. A built-in calculator allows students to immediately understand, for example, that buying a larger home includes higher taxes, insurance and utilities costs.

"Going digital has made the program much more intensive and impactful for the students," says Luu. "It allows them to look much closer at each budget line and really understand their options and how each choice affects their overall budget and financial success."

## Right Choices, Right Time

In determining the best platform for the new application, Luu and her team knew they needed a mobile device. Notebooks were too bulky for the students to carry around JA Finance Park's mini city, and smartphones didn't have the screen space required to view the large amount of information that needed to be displayed and understood.

For help in choosing the best tablet products to meet their requirements, JA turned to CDW, a long-standing

partner of JA, both in terms of financial donations and as a supplier for various IT initiatives.

Luu advised CDW that she and her team had to walk a fine line in their purchase. As with any other decision, they wanted to provide their local offices — which vary greatly in size, culture, IT skills and donors — with flexibility and choice, but not so much that it would ramp up the overall software development costs.

"The more types of tablets, versioning and operating systems we offer, the more intricacies and costs that are built into the programming," she explains. "So we needed to be careful. We rely exclusively on donor dollars to operate, and it's very important that we are responsible with those dollars."

The final selections also had to effectively run their in-house, homegrown application, says Dave Nozar, senior account manager for CDW.

After researching leading tablets and doing some application testing, CDW and JA determined that Apple iPad devices and Samsung Galaxy tablets were the best choices.

Using funds provided by Capital One, JA purchased a mix of approximately 3,000 Apple and Samsung devices, along with charging carts, at an extremely low price, thanks to CDW's provision of bulk, nonprofit and other discounts.

More important, CDW managed the unique logistics of getting varying numbers of tablets to different JA offices at different times.

Through its unique "buy and hold" program, CDW stored JA's tablet inventory at its distribution warehouse in Vernon Hills, Ill., and set up a one-stop process to consult with affiliates and then deliver tablets when they were needed.

"When an affiliate was ready to start moving forward, they could just pick up the phone and call me," says Nozar. "A lot of them weren't sure exactly which tablet product they wanted, so, because I worked with all of the affiliates, I was able to give them insight on what their colleagues were doing."



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## Syncing Up

Rolling out the tablets onsite involved its own set of challenges, says Luu.

"We needed to design and operate a solution that protects the integrity of the learning experience but also allows local influence," she explains. "And in doing so, each office had to get their staff to understand what it means to support all of these mobile devices in a building on any given day."

The crux of the JA Finance Park solution is a back-end, cloud-based content management system that stores huge amounts of data on approximately 200 "life personas" that students can take on for the day, the jobs available and salaries, national housing pricing, tax structures, various categories of insurance and myriad other budgeted line items included in the program.

The application communicates with a local server at each affiliate site that adjusts and supplements the national data with unique local information and graphics, such as salaries, the list prices and photos of real houses on the market, state and city tax rates and other items that reflect the actual cost of living for that area.

The tablets, once outfitted with the JA Finance Park application, simulate the entire four- to six-hour budgeting exercise.

Making it all work meant setting up a Wi-Fi network in each facility that could support 150 tablets running a graphics-intensive application, communicating continuously with the local server and designing a backup solution that could pick up the load if the network went down.

"Designing a product that is simple enough for the average nontechnical person to use but still achieve a fairly technical exercise on the back-end with the tablets, the Wi-Fi, a server and syncing up with the content management system was quite a feat," says Luu. "It was a huge learning experience for us, but in the

end the feedback from the students and the teachers and our volunteers has been very, very positive."

## Life Lessons

JA officials began rolling out tablets to its JA Finance Park facilities in the fall of 2014 and, at this point, 26 of the 29 affiliates that participate are up and running.

The technology solution has made the program more memorable and impactful, says JA of Washington's Dohl. "With the tablets, the experience is so engaging that the kids really buy into it," she says.

"Students tell us things like, 'I realize now that I have to spend wisely to be successful,'" Dohl says. "Most of them really make the connection that in order to really afford the things they want later in life, it's important to stay in school and think about what they're going to do after high school. And that's critical because it takes them beyond financial literacy and education and really instills in them a sense that they control their destiny, and it's up to them to make it what they want it to be."

Lents notes that getting those results requires a blended approach of both technology and the human touch, and this solution enables that. Volunteers, she says, no longer spend their time helping students with math problems but are completely freed up to advise and share their insights and experience.

"There's an opportunity for students and volunteers to have a level of conversation that they couldn't before, and just that level of engagement causes additional learning," she says, noting that as JA moves forward investigating new ways to improve programs, technology will be an important consideration.

→ Learn how to introduce new mobility solutions into an existing program at [CDW.com/mobility](http://CDW.com/mobility).

Mary Calvert

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