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By [Pooja Salhotra](#)

Photographs by [Desiree Rios](#)

A.I.-Driven Education: Founded in Texas and Coming to a School Near You



Alpha School, based in Austin, Texas, serves about 200 students from kindergarten through eighth grade and another 50 high schoolers across two campuses in central Austin.

A.I.-Driven Education: Founded in Texas and Coming to a School Near You



At Austin's Alpha School, students spend just two hours a day on academics, led by artificial intelligence tools. New Alpha schools are set to open in about a dozen cities this fall.

“We think it’s the Silicon Valley of education,” said Jamal Gross, seen in the second photo above, who joined Alpha as a guide in 2023.

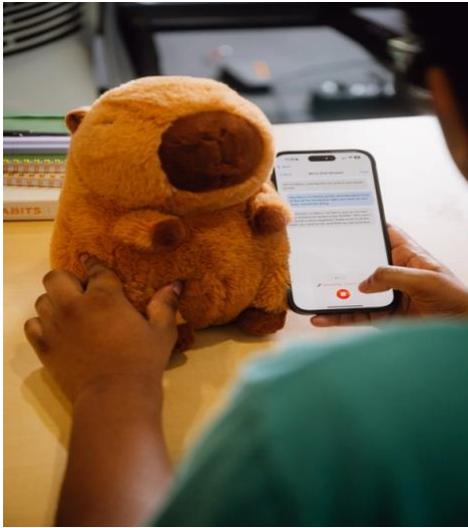
Alpha School, based in Austin, Texas, serves about 200 students from kindergarten through eighth grade and another 50 high schoolers across two campuses in central Austin. Credit...

In Austin, Texas, where the titans of technology have moved their companies and built mansions, some of their children are also subjects of a new innovation: schooling through artificial intelligence.

And with ambitious expansion plans in the works, a pricey private A.I. school in Austin, called Alpha School, will be replicating itself across the country this fall.

Supporters of Alpha School believe an A.I.-forward approach helps tailor an education to a student's skills and interests. MacKenzie Price, a podcaster and influencer who co-founded Alpha, has called classrooms "the next global battlefield."

"I've seen the future," [she wrote on social media](#), "and it isn't 10 years away. It's here, right now."



At Alpha's flagship, students spend a total of just two hours a day on subjects like reading and math, using A.I.-driven software. The remaining hours rely on A.I. and an adult "guide," not a teacher, to help students develop practical skills in areas such as entrepreneurship, public speaking and financial literacy.

Byron Attridge, 12, joined Alpha four years ago after he was home-schooled during the Covid-19 pandemic. He said that he was pleased with his academic progress so far and that he was learning eighth-grade math, ninth-grade reading and 10th-grade language arts.

"You don't get held back by your peers or what the teacher is teaching," said Byron, a rising seventh grader.

The school was founded under Legacy of Education, a for-profit education company. It began small in 2014, with 16 students in a rental home. It now serves about 200 students from kindergarten through eighth grade and another 50 high schoolers across two campuses in central Austin. Tuition is \$40,000 a year at the Austin schools, and guides earn six-figure salaries, according to Ms. Price and several guides.

Alpha will open more than a dozen new schools this fall, school officials said. Several of them will rent space from other private schools and start with about 25 students for the first year, Ms. Price said.

Alpha officials and guides say the various A.I. programs they use tailor instruction to each child's level instead of teaching to the average student. That frees teachers to attend to students' emotional needs.

It is not a "screen school," argued Ms. Price, who had grown dissatisfied with her daughter's public school education. Students at Alpha spend the majority of their school day in workshops where they collaborate with other students, Ms. Price said in an interview. The A.I.-led lessons free up guides to focus on motivating students instead of on time-intensive tasks like lesson planning and grading, several guides said.



"Motivation is 90 percent of what creates a great learning experience," MacKenzie Price said.



Camp students created cyanotypes, an early photographic printing form at an Alpha summer camp.

Alpha's expansion comes as companies, inside and outside the technology sector, are accelerating their investments in A.I. The Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the nation's [third-largest school district](#), has [trained more than 1,000 educators on new A.I. tools](#) and is introducing Google chatbots for more than 105,000 high schoolers — the largest U.S. school district deployment of its kind to date.

Alpha is also trying to establish a public-school charter network called Unbound Academy. This fall, the state of Arizona will open a virtual A.I. charter school in partnership with Alpha, making it Alpha's first foothold in a public education system.

Other school districts, in contrast, have resisted A.I., rushing to block chatbots from school laptops out of fear of cheating. [Some teachers](#) have asked state lawmakers to intervene, fearing that A.I. software will replace them.

Alpha's price tag and tech-sector appeal might be warping its student body toward the wealthy, but its founders say they can measure their success. School officials say their students have high rates of achievement, though it's hard to compare public and private schools partly because stronger results in private education are often a function of children of wealthier, well-educated families attending those schools.

"Motivation is 90 percent of what creates a great learning experience," Ms. Price said. "If a kid is not motivated, you aren't going to get anywhere."



To the tech weary, Alpha's pitch is shopworn. Education technology companies and philanthropists have pushed computers in classrooms for decades. Those experiments have had mixed results and proved difficult to scale. For example, a Silicon Valley-based program called Summit Learning, funded by Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, [has been resisted](#) by [public school students](#) from New York to Kansas.

Alpha's endeavor for Unbound Academy has been met with skepticism. State boards of education in Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Arkansas and North Carolina all rejected the program, some citing a lack of evidence that it works.

"The artificial intelligence instructional model being proposed by this school is untested and fails to demonstrate how the tools, methods and providers would ensure alignment to Pennsylvania academic standards," the [Pennsylvania Department of Education's decision](#) read, citing "multiple, significant deficiencies."

Alpha officials say the A.I. technology they use tailors instruction to each child's level instead of teaching to the average student.

Although Alpha says it offers students opportunities to collaborate, some have decided to leave after middle school to embrace a high school experience with team sports, student council and prom night. Byron, the rising seventh grader at Alpha, said he was not sure whether he wants to go to high school at Alpha.

“If you think of the purpose of schools as to prepare people for the roles of citizenship and democracy, there’s a lot of places where you aren’t trying to get kids to race as fast as they can,” said Justin Reich, director of the Teaching Systems Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and author of the book “Failure to Disrupt: Why Technology Alone Can’t Transform Education.”

Alpha is not the only school embracing A.I. A handful of public schools are piloting [Khanmigo](#), an A.I.-assisted tutoring bot developed by Khan Academy, an education nonprofit known for its online lessons. Even the American Federation of Teachers recently [announced](#) it would create an A.I. training hub for teachers.

But Alpha isn’t using A.I. as a tutor or a supplement. It is the school’s primary educational driver to move students through academic content.

In the afternoons, students focus on projects that require interaction with other students, such as wilderness training, cooking and sports. For example, fifth and sixth graders last year decided to create a food truck. To accomplish their goal, they learned how to budget, form a business plan — with the help of a chatbot — and to cook eggs.

“When we were all in the kitchen, it would get really stressful,” Byron said. “Working through that calmly and together is something I really improved on.”



Students learn to use A.I. tools for projects like creating their own arcade games.



The Alpha High School building in Austin.

Bret Siers, the C.E.O. of an A.I. video company, and his wife Robyn relocated from Los Angeles after the pandemic to send their twin boys, Lukas and Jaxon, to Alpha. The boys were ahead of their peers, said Ms. Siers, a lawyer, and she and her husband felt their progress was stagnant because their public charter school was focused on helping students who suffered learning losses during the pandemic.

Ms. Siers said she had been impressed by her children's independence and the way the instruction worked for their unique learning styles. Lukas, who has dyslexia, has developed confidence because he excels in nonacademic areas, including chess and other strategy-focused games, Ms. Siers said.

Alana and Peter Ackerson said they moved from Connecticut to Austin in part to send their daughters to Alpha this fall. The Ackersons, who both work in the tech industry, wanted their children to be exposed to A.I.

Last year, Alpha graduated its first class of seniors. Eleven of the 12 graduates went on to four-year universities, including Stanford, Vanderbilt, the University of Texas at Austin and Northeastern. The 12th student became a professional water skier, Ms. Price said.

Several Alpha high school students said their favorite part about the school was working on what Alpha calls their “masterpieces,” a time-intensive project coinciding with the student’s passion. For such projects, students have built a chatbot that offers dating advice, an emotional support teddy bear and a [120-acre mountain bike park](#), now the largest in Texas.

To complete the projects successfully, students said, they must surpass A.I.’s knowledge base and come up with a “spiky point of view,” or unexpected and novel perspectives.

“To be a useful person in the age of A.I., you have to have unique insights that A.I. doesn’t really agree with,” said Alex Mathew, 16, a rising senior at Alpha High School. “That’s the real differentiator,” he continued. “We are trying to beat A.I.”