

A teacher-free AI school is coming to Chicago, with tuition at \$55,000 a year

[Kate Armanini](#)



The former GEMS World Academy building at 350 E. South Water St. in Chicago, pictured on March 27, 2026, is where Alpha School will be located in the fall. (Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune)

On an unseasonably warm day in Chicago, Blake Mohseni stepped out for a walk and fielded a call about a school his 3-year-old daughter is still too young to attend. Mohseni — who works in finance and describes himself as “deep in AI”

— is among the fervent followers of Alpha School, a network of AI-based private schools soon opening a K-8 campus in the Loop.

There are no teachers, just “guides” to motivate students. Lessons, delivered through AI-powered software, are condensed into two hours. The rest of the day, students engage in an array of workshops, from building robots to scaling obstacle courses. It comes with a hefty price tag: \$55,000 a year.

Mohseni and his wife plan to enroll their daughter when she turns 4.

“I’m a firm believer that this is the future,” said Mohseni, who lives in Bloomingdale. “At the end of the day, the writing is on the wall, and you gotta evolve or be left behind.”

Alpha School opened in Austin, Texas, in 2014, and has since expanded to nearly two dozen locations across the U.S. Founder MacKenzie Price, an education entrepreneur and influencer, says AI-driven schooling allows for more personalized, efficient learning. The network now enrolls more than 1,000 students.

What’s lost from the traditional classroom? “Boredom, inefficiency and lack of mastery,” Price told the Tribune on a recent visit to Chicago. “AI is going to help us unlock the

greatest untapped resource in our world, which is human potential."

The approach has stirred both praise and skepticism. Alpha's swift rollout across the country comes as educators weigh the [integration of AI](#) in the classroom, a shift that has brought turbulence for some students and teachers.

Some education experts point to the lack of outside research supporting Alpha's curriculum. Others say the teacher-free model severs the relationships at the heart of learning.

"I worry that you're changing the nature of what learning and education, at its best, has always looked like," said Joe Vukov, an associate philosophy professor at Loyola University Chicago who studies the ethics of AI.

Price, for her part, is an unapologetic champion of the approach. Glossy and genial, she sat just a few blocks from the school's sleek glass building in the Loop, set to officially open for about 100 students in the fall. She is quick to note that she is a product of public schools.

"I would never want to send my own kids to a school where it was like, 'Just sit in rows on a computer all day,'" Price said. "That's not what it is."

Alpha students start their morning with two hours dedicated to core subjects. With beanbags, open-plan layouts, and

students working on laptops and tablets, Alpha schools resemble a lounge or co-working space more than a traditional classroom.

Alpha's AI software, developed in partnership with licensed education platforms such as Khan Academy and Membean, acts as an adaptive, one-on-one tutor. If students need extra time on a topic, the app slows down until they achieve mastery, according to Price.

The guides, who are not credentialed educators, supervise students and act as motivators and mentors. Later in the day, they steer workshops and set individual goals with students.

"We're not replacing teachers. The role is just changing," Price said. "Our teachers don't need to be subject matter experts."

Sarah Cone, a venture capitalist, enrolled her 8-year-old daughter at the Alpha's Manhattan campus in the fall. Her daughter shuffled through "traditional New York City elite private schools," Cone said, but none were the right fit.

U.S. Education Secretary Linda McMahon at Alpha School Austin in Austin, Texas, on Sept. 9, 2025. (Rick Kern/Getty)

She heard about Alpha through a friend in Texas and waited patiently for a school to open in New York. (Alpha also launched an eight-week summer camp in the Hamptons area of Long Island.) In just a few months, her daughter has advanced two grades in reading and math, which Cone attributes to the school's personalized curriculum.

"She's learning at this insane pace. She's really growing quickly and accelerating," she said. "I sound like I'm a cult convert or something, but I genuinely am just a parent that loves Alpha School."

Not everyone, though, is buying into the model. There is virtually no outside research on the academic outcomes of Alpha's AI-driven software, according to Victor Lee, an associate professor at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education. While some studies suggest that AI can streamline teaching, he cautioned against cutting out teachers altogether.

"There's just so much that teachers are doing that is well-beyond what even the most sophisticated language models can do," Lee said. "Right now, the evidence just is not there."

Alpha touts that its students score in the 99th percentile on the Northwest Evaluation Association MAP Growth tests,

which measure academic progress and are administered to millions of students nationwide. But most of those test-takers attend public schools, which complicates the comparison, according to Lee.

“This is a private school with tuition, and therefore tends to cater to a particular socioeconomic status, whose students would tend to perform very strongly on these measures,” Lee said.

Price argues that skepticism toward Alpha reflects a perennial problem of resistance to innovation in education. She acknowledges there is selection bias — that students with the financial means to attend often have greater resources to succeed academically — but says she is looking to change it. At Alpha’s flagship school in Texas, for example, more than 40% of students receive financial aid.

Alpha applied for charter status in 10 states, which would have made tuition free, but it was rejected in all but one, Price said.

“Some of these private schools, they want to keep themselves small and exclusive, instead of saying, ‘How do we educate more and more people?’” she said. “Private schools select for great kids. But I believe we are developing great kids.”

Alpha's expansion is unfurling amid the national debate over school choice and the Trump administration's federal voucher program.

In Illinois, Gov. JB Pritzker is [weighing whether to opt into the initiative](#), which would offer a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for donations to scholarship-granting nonprofits. Critics say the program diverts funds from public schools.

Supporters, including Price, say the program gives parents more options and allows low-income students access to a higher-quality education. In September, U.S. Education Secretary Linda McMahon toured Alpha in Austin, and was "very complimentary of what she saw," Price said. The Trump administration is actively promoting AI literacy in schools to "improve educational outcomes," according to an April [executive order](#).

But the visit fueled outcry from public school advocates. "Is this what the voucher lobby is pushing for?" said Pankaj Sharma, secretary-treasurer of the Illinois Federation of Teachers, in a statement to the Tribune. "Exorbitant tuition for a school with a MAGA founder, no teachers ... No thank you."

Both Alpha and Price have said that they are apolitical and have no ties to the Trump administration. Still, Price has donated more than \$2 million since 2023 to Republican

candidates and political action committees promoting school choice, according to [The Washington Post](#).

"We've got families from all ends of the political spectrum, all religions, races, you name it. ... I think it's a bummer that so many education initiatives end up becoming (characterized) one way or another," Price said.

Nearly a dozen new Alpha campuses are opening in the fall amid surging demand. Mohseni, the Bloomingdale parent, said he hopes a second Chicago-area campus will be operating by the time his daughter enrolls in kindergarten.

"At the end of the day, the biggest asset that we can give our daughter is not a bag of money, it's the brain between her ears," Mohseni said. "We're not skeptical of AI because we know that this is where the future is going."