No teachers, just AI: Inside the controversial $75,000-a-year private grade schools changing education

Summary
Alpha Schools in Los Angeles use AI tutoring to replace teachers, charging over $75,000 annually. Joe Liemandt's software aims to accelerate learning, while guides oversee activities like coding and surfing. Critics warn of risks; Alpha plans expansion.

Nov. 23, 2026 3 AM PT
For Subscribers
June 23, 2026



Various 3-D printers adorn a makers space at Alpha South Bay LA.
(Ronaldo Bolaños/Los Angeles Times)

As many public schools and parents try to keep kids away from artificial intelligence, there's a new cluster of private schools in the Los Angeles area replacing teachers with AI.

It's experimental, expensive and controversial, but the parents and educators driving this disruption say it's working.

Conor Neu was stressed about the education of his two daughters and son. At their public school in Manhattan Beach, they spent most of the day trying to master basic subjects like reading and math but were below

benchmarks. They had no time or classes for learning basic life skills such as financial literacy and independence. Worst of all, Neu says, his kids were bored.

“I’ve never been enthralled with the way normal schools work,” he said.

He heard about an educational company called Alpha School in Texas, which offers an impressive-sounding, AI-powered alternative, and rallied a group of other local parents looking for options to convince the school to set up near them. This year it launched inaugural classes in Santa Monica, Playa Vista and Malibu.



Matt Shenker, head of guide of southwest region Alpha Schools, at Alpha South Bay LA.

(Ronaldo Bolaños/Los Angeles Times)

Alpha says it uses AI to give each student intense, personalized online tutoring to quickly master the basics and then spend the rest of the day building other talents, such as coding, confidence or sports skills.

One of the biggest evangelists for the new system is tech mogul Joe Liemandt, the school's biggest investor and principal. He is behind Trilogy, a company that developed much of the software the school uses. He says generative artificial intelligence has turbocharged education tech because it enables personalized lessons that account for each student's pace, interests, strengths and weaknesses.

"All educational content is obsolete," Liemandt said in a podcast last year. "Every textbook, every lesson plan, every test, all of it is obsolete because gen AI is going to be able to deliver a personalized lesson just for you."

Education experts warn that it is still early and the first attempts to use intense interaction with AI to accelerate learning still are experimental and could backfire. Young students need a trained adult in the room for supervision and support, they say, and there hasn't

been enough testing of AI in education to be sure it works or is safe.



A lower grade level classroom in Alpha South Bay LA. (Ronaldo Bolaños/Los Angeles Times)

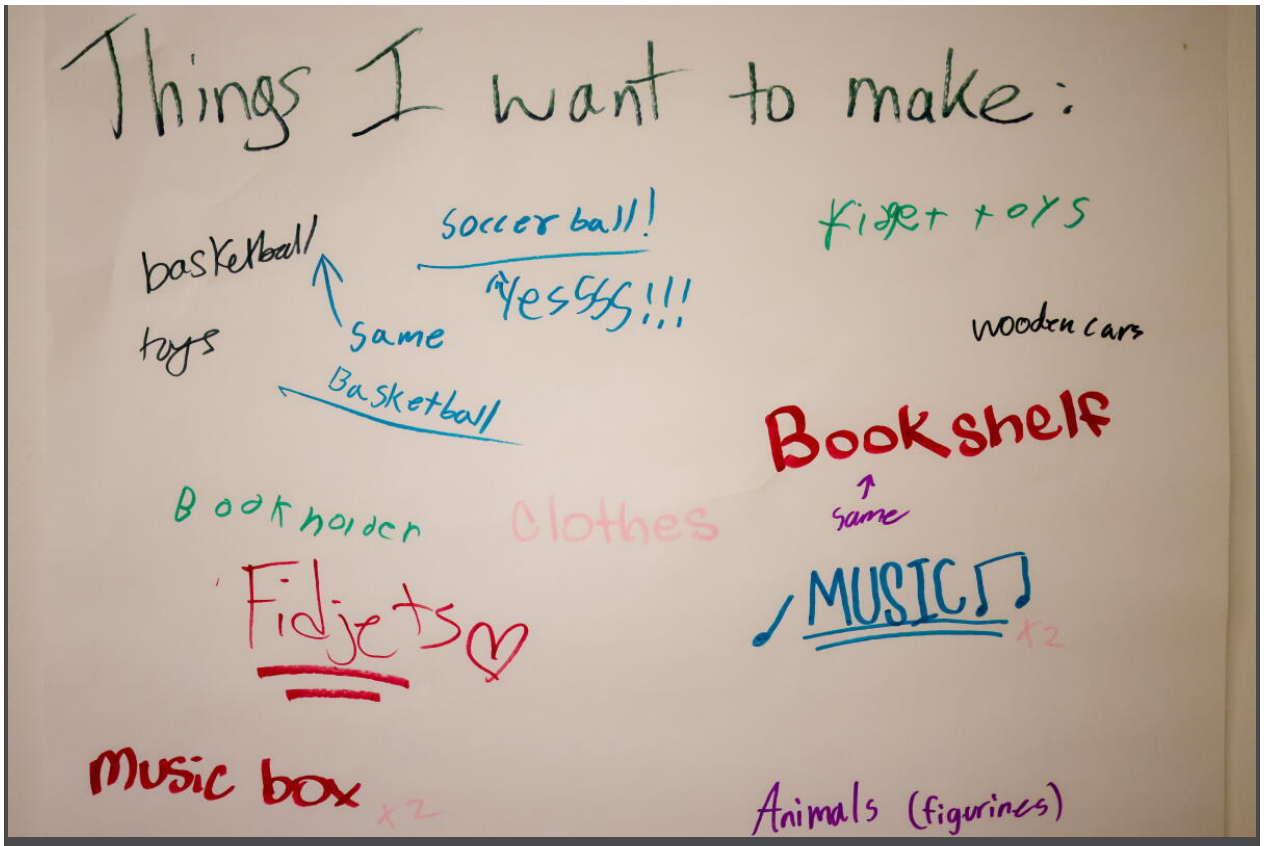
UCLA lecturer Anne Blackstock-Bernstein said the idea that AI-powered software is delivering learning material to students isn't reassuring.

"So much of learning happens collaboratively and in conversation with humans," Blackstock-Bernstein said. "Until we have more time with this sort of technology, it's going to be hard to know exactly what is lost when you do that with a machine."

The success or failure of this education experiment will shape how much educators and families embrace AI. If it falls flat, it could harm students, but if it succeeds, it could solve a problem plaguing many parents: How do you get children the individualized attention they need without paying for expensive tutors?

Alpha says its model has been operating for more than a decade, with results showing students can learn twice as much as their peers. The school costs more than $75,000 per year.

Among Alpha parents who have been vocal on social media are former OpenAI executive Fidji Simo and George Arison, Grindr's chief executive. A 10-year-old Alpha School student from Texas was First Lady Melania Trump's guest at the State of the Union address.



A scatter list of various items students wish to make in their makers space in Alpha South Bay LA.

(Ronaldo Bolanos/Los Angeles Times)

Alpha was founded in Austin in 2014 by MacKenzie Price and Brian Holtz. In 2022, Liemandt committed $1 billion to the school. Liemandt is also Alpha's principal and the developer of its AI-driven software.

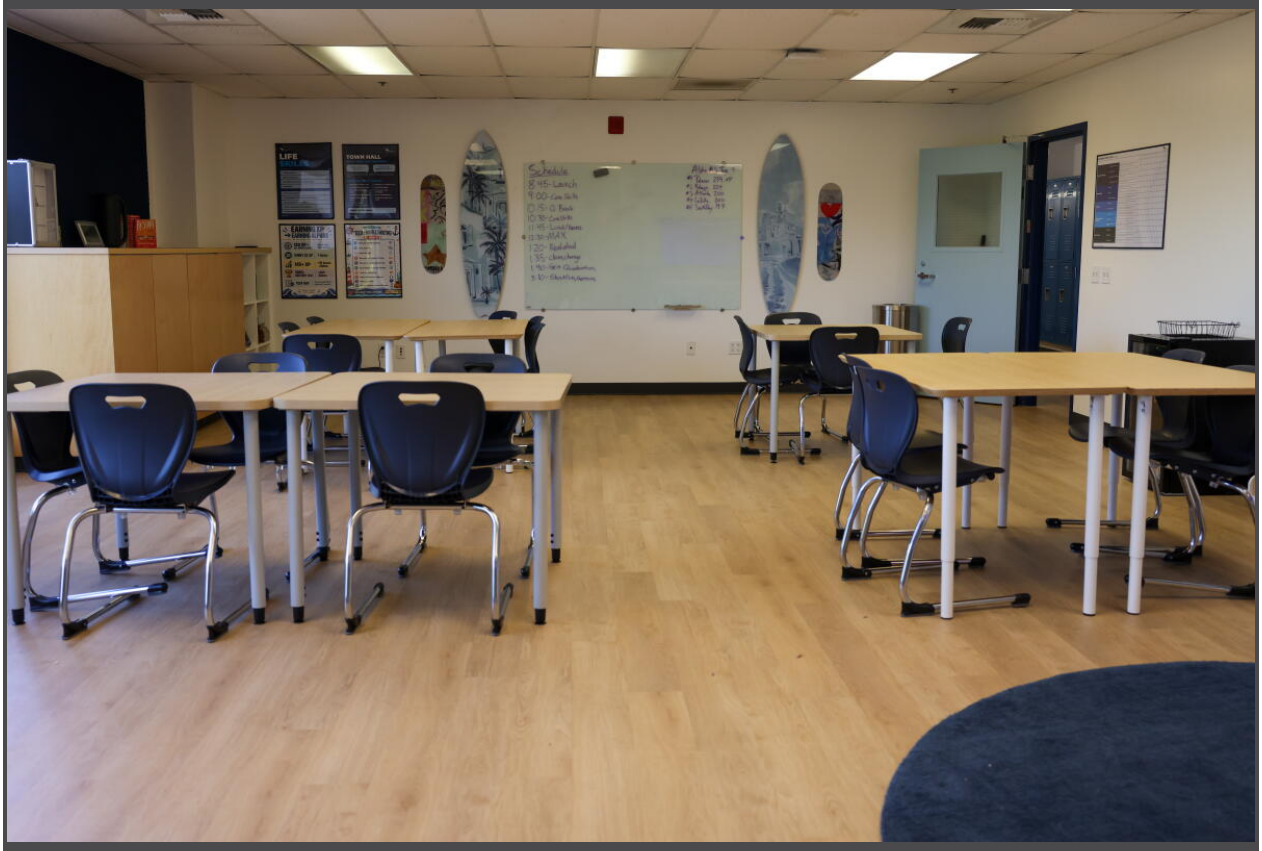
Alpha's national network grew to 50 campuses this year from 20 last year. Nine are in California.

"A lot of parents around L.A. are really aligned with what we're doing and aren't scared of the technology," said Matt Shenker, who oversees all of Alpha School's

southwest region campuses and leads its Playa Vista location.

At the core of Alpha's curriculum is its software system, TimeBack, named for what it promises students. Alpha says its AI-powered lessons can do in two hours what a traditional school takes six hours to do.

It tracks students' progress using multiple-choice tests that get harder as students answer correctly. Students must score above 90% to move on. They work silently through AI-powered lessons informed by test results and matched to their skill levels as they advance.



An upper level classroom in Alpha South Bay LA.

(Ronaldo Bolaños/Los Angeles Times)

Instead of teachers, Alpha uses guides who often don't have traditional education backgrounds or degrees. A blog post from the University of Colorado's National Education Policy Center estimated that about one-third of Alpha guides have education training or degrees.

Although the lessons work using AI from Anthropic, OpenAI and elsewhere, the students are not interacting with Claude or ChatGPT.

After the two-hour session, students can, with their guides' help, explore other areas, for example, group projects, field trips or using AI platforms to build websites or learn instruments.

"We can spend the whole rest of the day actually developing who the learner is," said Alexis Wilson, Alpha's director of leadership development.

What that looks like depends on the session. Neu's children have learned to use drills and build bookshelves for their classroom. In one workshop, students designed toy prototypes, then made them on 3-D printers. In another workshop meant to teach independence, students went surfing.

Neu's middle school-aged children are preparing for a challenge created by Alpha that combines a 10K run, a tire change, a cold plunge and solving a Rubik's Cube.

Alpha also uses an incentive system that gives students video-game-like rewards for progress. Students earn experience points toward real-world rewards, such as new gym equipment or a set of headphones.



A TV display of top earners of inside a classroom at Alpha South Bay LA. Students can earn "alpha bucks" that can be redeemed for prizes.

(Ronaldo Bolaños/Los Angeles Times)

As Alpha and other schools experiment with AI, public education has been avoiding it.

The Los Angeles Unified School District issued a student moratorium on generative AI on school-issued devices for the school year. The moratorium follows a June board vote to limit students' screen time in classrooms. Other Southern California districts, such as Long Beach Unified, bar students younger than 13 from using consumer generative AI tools like Google Gemini and ChatGPT. Some schools are trying to block the AI embedded in Google Chromebooks. Los Angeles Unified School District has more than 250,000 of the Google laptops.

Rebecca Winthrop, director of the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, said AI safety in the classroom will depend on how it's used and monitored.



A emporium with various prizes students can earn through redeeming “Alpha Bucks” in Alpha South Bay LA.

(Ronaldo Bolaños/Los Angeles Times)

“Narrow AI use can be quite effective,” Winthrop said. “The areas that I’m really concerned about is what I would call wide AI use, which is when students are just accessing really powerful AI technology without any supports or guardrails.”

Winthrop is also uncertain about gamifying education, where students earn points and win prizes for scoring well or completing lessons.

“It’s actually the part of the school that I’m most uncomfortable with because it’s very, very transactional,” she said.

Some scholars said Alpha and others touting how AI can turbocharge learning need to show the traditional education industry more proof.



Greg Vallario said he enrolled his daughter because Alpha “seemed ahead of the curve with AI.” He likes that she is part of the process of reinventing learning, despite it sometimes “being kind of messy.”

(Eric Thayer/Los Angeles Times)

“They should open themselves up to rigorous external research,” said Morgan Polikoff, an associate professor at USC. “In the absence of that, there’s always going to be tremendous skepticism about whether the model is working at all.”

Alpha said it has opened its doors to independent research on the school and given researchers access to student data, though the research is still in its early stages. It said that giving students incentive helps them learn and that while the school uses AI to teach, humans develop and drive Alpha’s curriculum.

“Human relationships and meaningful interactions are central to our model, not replaced by technology,” a spokesperson said.

Alpha school parents say that though the school year has just started, they are excited to see the results of the radically new system.

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As Alpha perfects its system and software, it sees a massive untapped market of unsatisfied and struggling students it could help. In the long term, it hopes to make

the system available online and integrate it into public schools.

For the next wave of private school openings, it has its sights set on more Southern California locations, including Beverly Hills.

Two months into the school year, Neu says it has been worth it.

His children are happier with the model — and the no-homework policy. His seventh-grader's vocabulary has shot up to 11th-grade level

He doesn't mind the new school's experimental nature because traditional options weren't working anyway.

"I don't know if it's perfect," he said. "It'll probably continue to be reshaped through the years."