



Alpha School: Accreditation Boosts Excellence in a New Pedagogical Approach

UNCONVENTIONAL PRIVATE SCHOOL NETWORK FINDS THE RIGHT ACCREDITATION FIT



All photos courtesy of the Alpha School

Across the country, schools are reimagining education to raise achievement and equip students for a rapidly evolving world. One striking example is the Alpha School system—a network of 17 private schools stretching from Miami to California.

Alpha students consistently score in the top 1% nationally on MAP tests, which track academic growth over time. Additionally, from 2021 to 2024, 97% of Alpha students who took Advanced Placement® exams achieved scores of 3 and above, which qualify for college credit at many universities.

Alpha School's pedagogical approach differs significantly from the traditional school model. Alpha students work on core curriculum skills and knowledge for two to three hours in the morning. The instruction is highly individualized via AI tutoring apps that address individual learning gaps, incorporate student interests, and allow each child to set their own pace. Human "guides" provide further personalized instruction as needed as well as non-academic support.

The guides also lead students through life skills workshops (e.g., public speaking, entrepreneurship, writing skills, outdoor education), building grit, creativity, and adaptability. In the afternoon, the students explore their passions, culminating in “Alpha X” projects at the high school level that surpass the traditional capstones and demonstrate real-world impact.

One Alpha High student pursued his passion for technology, PC repair, and leveraging AI by passing the CompTIA A+ Core 1 exam and starting his own PC repair business, documenting his journey via YouTube. Other Alpha X projects include an augmented reality board game, an avatar app that helps teens improve their social and communication skills, a gamified running app, and a social networking app designed to combat the loneliness epidemic among young men.

Finding the Right Fit

Alpha School’s unique instructional model initially made accreditation seem impossible—like forcing a square peg into a round hole. “When I came to Alpha, the plan was not to pursue accreditation,” said Chris Locke, head of Alpha High in Austin, Texas.

Soon after joining in 2021, Locke convinced system leaders to explore the process. “I had the autonomy and support to make that decision because of my prior experience,” he said.

Locke’s previous school had been accredited by Cognia® (then known as AdvancEd), a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that accredits schools across the globe. At first, Locke was unsure whether the nonprofit was the right fit for Alpha School. However, when he reviewed the Cognia Performance Standards, which had been updated in 2022 to address modern challenges and incorporate new research, all doubts disappeared. “I felt like this was an accrediting body that understands us,” he said. “This was the only one to consider.”

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Alpha High School Pilots Accreditation

Locke and other Alpha leaders decided to first accredit Alpha High, the system's only high school at the time. "The biggest reason was that it hurt students to have an unaccredited transcript," Locke explained. "Moving from private school to private school was not a big deal for students, but going from private to public was a challenge." Additionally, leaders wanted to use that initial accreditation to confirm whether Cognia was indeed the right fit for Alpha School.

Locke reported feeling supported by the Cognia Accreditation Review team from the start. "They asked us hard questions, not as a 'gotcha,' but because they were genuinely interested in helping us be a better school," he said.

The review team inquired about how learning happened at Alpha High and how students engaged with the overall process. The team also wanted to know what the performance data showed and what systems sustained practices and improved outcomes. "It was about how to continuously improve the school versus how to run a report, put it on a shelf for five years, and then dust it off when getting ready for the next visit," Locke said.



Review Team

Recommendation:

Improve Alpha Processes

Alpha High earned accreditation on June 28, 2023, scoring well against the Cognia Performance Standards. The review team, however, recommended steps to encourage staff to engage in action research aimed at improving practices and advancing learning (Standard 25).

One of the team's recommendations was the creation of a formal, documented operating program that would support Alpha High guides' daily collaborations. The next year, Locke's leadership team implemented an AI system to document the collaborations as well as other aspects of guides' work, such as creating workshops.

Based on the review team's recommendation, school leaders trained a Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT) model to capture data from the meetings and instantly provide guides with actionable feedback.

The GPT suggests questions to help guides uncover students' motivations and challenges and offers strategies for building stronger relationships. "It's really important that we're continuously providing the right coaching, motivational support, and tutoring when appropriate," said Locke.

After seeing how well the Cognia Accreditation process suited Alpha High, Alpha School system leaders approved systemwide accreditation. The Alpha School achieved official Cognia System Accreditation on March 31, 2025.

System leaders aligned Alpha High's guide workflows with those at other campuses. "We need to make sure we are a seamless K-12 operation, not a K-8 and then a separate 9-12 school," said Locke. "We also want to provide whatever a student needs as effectively as possible and ensure the experience is consistent across all schools in the system."

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Additional Benefits of the Cognia Accreditation Process

“My takeaway from the process was that Cognia supports diverse methods and instruction as long as student benefit and academic performance remain the ultimate goal,” said Locke. “They also care about developing the whole learner and teaching life skills. All of that was embraced rather than dismissed. It felt like we were welcomed, not treated as an outlier.”



The AI-powered evaluation system is just one of the tools Alpha School uses to generate feedback for guides. The guides also obtain feedback on student engagement from the Cognia Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®). Locke was pleasantly surprised by the array of tools available from Cognia. “At my previous school, we didn’t use the eleot, teacher observation tools, or any of the other digital resources,” he said.

One aspect of Cognia Accreditation that Locke especially appreciated was the requirement for system leaders to perform their own assessment of how well their schools were meeting the Cognia Performance Standards. “It was a deep, reflective look at what we’re doing well, what we can do better, and how we can continue to deliver to the students,” he said.

Alpha School is establishing more schools across the United States, and the recommendations Cognia provided for evaluating guides’ work have supported those expansion plans. “We must be able to compare data, campus to campus, to make sure we’re delivering,” said Locke. “Instead of relying on anecdotes, we want data that confirms that the learning experience at our Scottsdale campus is equivalent to the experience on our Austin campuses or our Santa Barbara campus. We want to scale effectively.”

A True Partnership: Benefits Flow Both Ways

Cognia's guidance has helped Alpha School refine its approach to continuous improvement. In turn, the system has shared its innovative ideas and practices with the nonprofit's network of educational institutions.

At the July 2025 Cognia Nonpublic School Leadership Conference, two Alpha School students gave a presentation on leveraging the power of AI in schools—the first time students had ever presented at the event. Their session impressed educators so much that Alpha School was invited to speak at the Cognia IMPACT Conference in Atlanta that November.

"Cognia was different from other accrediting organizations because Cognia really does look at accreditation as a continuous improvement model and a partnership," said Locke. "That partnership aspect was very important to Alpha leaders."

As schools across the United States continue to reimagine how to prepare students for the modern world, Alpha School's partnership with Cognia has proven that innovation and accreditation need not be at odds. Even the most unconventional approaches to learning can meet rigorous standards, and the right accrediting body can be a catalyst rather than a constraint. Now Alpha students benefit from the best of both worlds—cutting-edge pedagogy and global legitimacy.

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