

The Rational Optimist Podcast

Stephen McBride // *The Rational Optimist Society*

Jonathon E. Stewart // Alpha School

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Stephen McBride: I was just down in Austin and every parent that I talked to that send their kid to Alpha School, they raved about how great it was. That's not generally what I hear from most parents. So tell me how is Alpha School different than normal school?

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, I mean, I think the, the first thing, just on that note that makes Alpha different is, uh, one of the commitments that Alpha makes to every student, which is that they will love school and not as a result of going to school, but as a sort of prerequisite for making sure that they are motivated and engaged and able to, um, you know, engage with the academic piece of the day. Uh, and then also have the time back to be able to explore their passions and learn life skills that are valuable, um, both in school and outta school and for the rest of your life. And, um, they take that very, very, very seriously. The, the, the guides for, for the kids, it is their primary responsibility, um, or among their primary responsibilities to make sure that that's the case.

Stephen McBride: Just talk me through the average day at Alpha School. Like how, how is it different than, than normal school? What did the kids do? What did they study? Just talk me through all that stuff.

Jonathon Stewart: I guess I should start at the beginning, which is the, the key fundamental differences, um, with Alpha School, which is that it's based on, uh, an AI backed platform that essentially allows kids to crush their academics in two hours in the morning. And that opens up the rest of the day to be able to spend time, uh, developing life skills, trying out new things, exploring, discovering their passions, uh, from a very young age, all the way from kindergarten on.

So a typical day starts with, um, what, what we call a limitless launch. And, uh, it's based on the idea that every kid at Alpha School is truly, and every kid truly is limitless if they're given the proper tools to be able to engage with what they're doing and be fully, um, you know, fully present for their academic studies and fully present for everything in the afternoon.

So the limitless launch in the morning is when the, uh, our teachers, which we call guides, are essentially, um, group up with the kids and there are a lot of high fives and there's a, uh, an intentional shift, uh, in mindset to a growth mindset in the morning, setting a growth mindset for the day. Um, it's a really cool high energy physical piece of the day that, you know, kind of gets the kids to get the willies out and really, um, you know, be ready for the day ahead.

And then they go straight from there into their academic period of the day. Um, which again is, uh, where they interact with our AI platform that essentially meets each kid where they are in every subject. So if you're a little bit ahead in math or a little bit behind in reading, um, the kids are assessed when they go in. And, um, the AI tool essentially sorts those, uh, curriculum individually for each kid. And then they spend about 25 minutes, uh, on each of the core subjects, which are math, reading, language science. And, uh, with little breaks in between. Again, just to get up and move around and stretch and make sure that they can be super focused for the time that they're there.

And, um, then from there, uh, we have time for lunch. There's a bunch of unstructured time in the middle of the day as well. Again, just to allow kids to have the freedom to, to be, you know, to become self-driven about all they're doing.

And then the afternoons are where we have our life skills workshops, and those can take a number of, uh, forms, but, uh, you know, the, the primary ones, uh, all fall under categories of leadership and teamwork. Uh, financial literacy and entrepreneurialism, public speaking and storytelling, uh, socialization and relationship building, and then also resilience and grit.

And, um, so, uh, after the afternoon period of that, um, the kids have a, um, again, gathered around, uh, for what are called town halls a lot where, um, again, basically they're able to discuss how things are going. That's a chance for them to talk about if they'd like to have any changes to rules or to the way the their, you know, their cohort functions. That they're, they have a real agency in that. And then, uh, it's also a time to give shout outs to other kids. You know, they, Hey, I saw you doing this awesome thing, and it, it really allows kids to support other kids and lift them up at the end of the day. So again, it's just having that awesome energy that, that begins each day and carries through the day, and ends each day. And, uh, and that's sort of where it goes.

And then, uh, assuming the, the, the way the model is built too, it's built so that all of that academic work, again, is condensed into that two hour period in the morning so that there's no homework after school either. Um, you know, I think as the kids get older and into high school, um, you know, things get a, a little, a little more, um, academically, uh, intense, of course. But, uh, it's always, the design is always so that you can get things done in that period in the morning.

Stephen McBride: So Alpha, the, the kids at Alpha School get all their academics done in two hours, and as far as they understand across the board, the kids are basically in the top percentile or top two, you know, 2% nationally on, on all these subjects. Yet traditional school, you have six or seven hours of, of school a day. Just go on a, on a little bit deeper on how that is actually possible, because it's, it's kind of like, Hey, you're telling me my, my kid can, can study less and achieve better grades. It's, it's like the magic silver bullet.

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah. Yeah, for sure. I mean it, that, that, that is the magic thing. And I think the, it was all based on the understanding that, um, there's just a lot of wasted time in the traditional school day, and there's a lot of sitting around, there's a lot of being lectured at, there's a lot of crowd control. Um, there's a lot of shifting between things, you know, and, um, and I

think it was, uh, being able to crack open this idea that if a, if a child is truly motivated, and this whole system is built on the motivation of the child, and that is where our teachers come in.

They will actually sit with every child and come up with a, uh, personalized, motivational approach for each kid. You know, some kids are inspired by being able to have a little extra time in the afternoon to do whatever it is that they love doing. I one student I know of, um, that's just birdwatching and that is the thing that unlocks the motivation for that particular kid. For other kids, it's um, you know, being able to earn things called alphas, which are essentially a currency at Alpha School, and they can save those and, um, uh, spend for items in what's called the emporium at the school. Um, or it's just a matter of, uh, being able to, you know, sit in a different place in the room if they're able to crush their academics.

And, and, uh, you know, we, we've found that when kids are properly motivated, it really does only take that small amount of time. And again, with the, you know, the curriculum being set exactly where their learning point is, where it's challenging, but not over their head based on skills they haven't learned before. Um, and it's never too easy either so that they're just whizzing through and not, uh, not essentially learning as well. But, um, yeah, that's the, I mean, it's a, it is really incredible to see what kids can do when they have the right framework around the school day.

Stephen McBride: You talked about motivation. It seems the in skill currency is maybe as important as the curriculum, as the, as the AI tutoring. What, again, just talk me through how you arrived at that. First of all, how you discovered, oh, hey, this could be a, a, a big deal for the kids, and then what have you learned about how incentives, shape, motivation, and long-term? Learning habits because I think when a lot of people hear about maybe gamification or paying kids, they, their mind are immediately racists to, oh, shortterm, short term fix. But in this case, it doesn't seem like that.

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, no, it's something we talk about a lot, in fact, because motivation is so essential to what we do. And I think the, the better way to think about it is that there are different ways that each of us as individuals are inspired to do something. And if we get inspired to do something and we're engaged, than that's where the magic happens, right? So I think the, you know, whether it's currency, whether it's, um, time to do something that you really like doing, whether it's, um, being able to, you know, I, I heard another story about a kid whose, uh, special motivational piece was being able to do a Taylor Swift dance, like a 32nd Taylor Swift dance kind of at will. And that, um, that is what got her lit up and got her engaged to be able to say, okay, now I'm gonna go do this.

Um, and you know, the idea behind all of this is to say, okay, if we have an engaged child who approaches material and then is really into it and learns it and, and gets through that and continues to, uh, excel at each, um, at each stage of this learning. And you know, when we have these map tests, which is where you were referring to earlier that, um, you know, the kids do get tested, um, throughout the year to make sure that they're meeting their learning goals. And we see that, you know, these amazing numbers come out of that. It creates a, um, a mentality of success in the kids.

You know, it's, we say competence leads to confidence. So, you know, uh, and that happens all through the day, not just with the academics, but in our life skills. A lot of times the, the workshops will be built around a task or a project that seems impossible at the beginning of it. Um, you know, these are like, um, a second grader running a 5K race or, uh, you know, a kindergartner, um, doing a 5K bike. And, um, you know, these things where parents and students, like at the very beginning are like, how are we gonna do this? This seems impossible. And then, you know, by virtue of, uh, engagement with the guides and getting like 1% better every day, that sort of atomic habits model, um, kids find that they're able to, to find success in each of these things.

So whether it's in their academic period and they, they build a, you know, a success mentality around that, or it's in the, um, life skills workshops in the afternoon. Each of those successes build on the next and the next and the next and the next. And that's where I think, you know, uh, if, if a, a, a love of science comes out of that, it's because they've had a chance to be successful at it over and over and over again.

Uh, but whatever it is, you know, the way the model works, it creates kids that by the time they're in high school, you can throw a novel problem of any kind at these kids. And rather than being like, oh, I don't know how to do that, or stress out, or run away, or freeze up, they approach it again and again by saying, okay, I dunno how to do this, but I know that I can do it and let's figure out how to do it. Let's take this tool. Let's try this tool and tackle this problem. Okay, that didn't work. Let's pivot. Let's try this. Maybe I need to go get some extra resources to figure out how to do this thing. I know where to look because I've done that before too.

So again, it's a long-winded answer to your question, but that, that spark, I think is what, what we talk about and it's the, it's whatever it takes on the motivational side at the beginning of that process to be a catalyst for this entire, um, growth of, of learning. And it all starts with that love of school. It all starts with whatever it is we need to do to unlock that motivation in a kid. So it really is, when you hear the, the argument about intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, it's almost like it's an, um, you know, the wrong argument, uh, because it's, you know, obviously loving what you do, being engaged in what you do, being passionate about what you do. That's a big part of what the school is all about.

Um, and you know, by every measure that we have, there's absolutely no validity to the idea that these ways to get kids motivated initially is not something that, that unlocks all these other things.

Stephen McBride: And is it a human that, that kind of hones in on that individual motivation for the, for the, the student at the start and then they, can they, is that embedded in the AI then, or how does Exactly, does it work?

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, no, it's a, it is 100% a human. It's the relationship that the student has with their teacher, and the teacher that is one of their primary responsibilities is figuring out what that thing is to unlock that motivation. And sometimes it shifts and sometimes it, you know, sometimes it, you have to continually figure that out. So they're, they're always. Always in that mode.

When it comes to the ai, the AI is really just about creating that individualized learning plan in terms of building a curriculum for each kid. So, um, that's less about the motivation piece. The motivation piece is all human. Um, the AI is really just about, um, assessing the data and, you know, all of this is data in and data out. It's the kind of thing where you, you can look at a, a screen at the end of the day and know exactly what your kid has done during that day, like down to the lesson. If you, if you wanna dig in that far. Uh, and certainly, you know, there are summaries every week and, you know, it allows, uh, parents to have a real lens on what kids are doing academically as well too. Uh, so there's, there's a lot of value in the way that, that all works. But again, yeah, the AI is very database for sure.

Stephen McBride: Talk me through the, the tech stack at Alpha Skill. Like how does it stack up against something like, can me go, could I as a, you know, I have three, I have three kids, could I. Go home and use chat GPT to create something similar. Just talk, talk me through all the uh, yeah, the, the differences.

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, no, great question. So, um, yeah, the tech stack is, it's ever evolving and I think the, you know, the benchmark for what goes into the, the tech stack is that it has to be the best there it is on the market or otherwise, obviously we try to do as much of that homegrown as possible, uh, and have, uh, several of the apps that are homegrown. You know, IXL is a great example to talk about as a, as a math app. Uh, and for the longest time, that was what was used as part of the tech stack because it was sort of the, you know, the best or one of the best on the market until we were able to develop something better. And that's, that's sort of the benchmark for, for all of that.

Um, yes, I mean that, that you, you certainly could, could go ahead and, and try to do that with chat GPT and set it up. I think our, our internal model is more sophisticated than that and looks at more, more data points and, um, you know, is able to, to craft that, that, uh, plan for each kid, that academic plan for each kid.

But then I think it's also, you know, it is, there's some sort of alchemy in the guide relationship as well that really helps to, I mean, without, again, without that motivation, none of this really works. And, uh, in fact, for a long time, you know, for 18 months as we were developing our Alpha Anywhere product, which is a, a homeschooling part, which is essentially the, the academic tool in the morning, something you could take to your kids. Um, it was only performing at a one, one x level. The same, like, the same as as anything else in the, the benchmark for the school is two x. That's one of the commitments as well. So the kids will learn two x. And so it took a long time. It took 18 months to figure out or longer to figure out what it is that they could add into that, that would create that motivational piece as well. And uh, and I think, I think this week was when they just started, um, they started having some info sessions about it. So they have, they have managed to, to crack that piece finally too. But it involves, uh, it does involve motivation as well, so.

Stephen McBride: How, you know, you obviously have bloom to a Sigma problem back in 1984. First of all, do you, do you think you've solved Bloom to a Sigma problem?

Jonathon Stewart: I mean, that's the whole, that's the whole goal. That was, and we talk about that, that all the time. And the fact that, um, it is that one-on-one, that one-on-one instruction that makes all the difference. And, uh, certainly the data would support that. Yes, we have cracked that problem, so.

Stephen McBride: And then how, how scalable do you think this is? Where, where I'm going with this, obviously Bloom Bloom's two Sigma was, was one-on-one, I believe at Alpha School. It's, it's around five to one. Um, with the motivation piece, with, you know, the guides are so important as we as, as you just laid out. Um, what's the kind of, do you, do you see an upper ceiling to, this is a, is a 10 to one, is a 20 to one, you know, how are you thinking about that?

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, it's a, it's a good question. So, I mean, I think we think of the one-on-one as the AI tutor to the students. So that, that's the one-to-one ratio that we're talking about in terms of the guide to student ratio. Yeah. It, it is, it, it varies. It goes, um, about eight, eight to one. It goes up to 12 to one. As we get into sort of the middle grades, and even in high school, it can extend up to 15 to one even. But that's also part of the model as well by high school, you know, kids are very, very independent, very, um, very self-driven, very self-motivated.

Um, the guides remain a, an essential piece of all of that, as, you know, sort of ongoing mentors and, um, you know, coaches, um, life coaches kind of thing. So, um, you know, in terms of the way the model is set up, uh, you know, I think we're we the, the one-to-one AI tutor to student is the thing that has no scalable top ceiling, I guess I would say.

Um, and then, you know, beyond that, in terms of setting up the, the actual schools, that's what we're, that's what we're out there doing right now is to really kind of follow the interest that we have gotten from places around the country. And, um, you know, at the same time, the, the main thing that we wanna make sure that we're doing is maintaining that quality, the same quality that you get at Austin or Miami where we, where we have a school as well. And uh, so everything is centralized. The guides are all trained in the same way. Um, there's a lot of that, uh, you know, coming back to Austin also. Uh, so, you know, as we expand, the number one thing is just to make sure that we're doing it in a way that is the same or better quality than we have in the existing schools already.

Stephen McBride: I have a, I have a friend that I, I live out in Abu Dhabi and I have a friend, um, I have a friend from Cape Town asking when is it gonna come to Cape Town?

Jonathon Stewart: That's awesome. Yeah. I mean, we're definitely, I mean there, there's all kinds of exploration going on and, uh, you know, expanding internationally is certainly something that is discussed often is something that is certainly on everyone's radar. And you know, I think there, there is demand from people that we've talked to sort of all around the world. So it's just a matter of, again, making sure that we can expand as quickly as possible, but without sacrificing even one iota of, of, um, of it being top quality.

I believe K through 12, the structure provides kids with an extra nine years of freed up time when you take into account the, the two hours of academics a day.

Stephen McBride: Yeah. What's the the coolest things, the, the most important things that you've seen kids do with their freed up time so far?

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, I mean I think the, it, like I said before, it's sort of, it starts early. So all of these, you know, being able to, um, experience some of these life skills that you don't normally get in a traditional academic environment from an early age allows kids to just sample all kinds of different things and see what it is, you know, maybe I like this or maybe I like that. Um, and as they get older, those, um, skills build upon one another. You know, we, we introduce Alphas, for example, with financial literacy, very young. And um, then that kind of scales out to understanding how credit cards work and understanding how businesses work and, and understanding, you know, the fundamentals of entrepreneurialism and, uh, you know, all of those just build upon themselves until by high school they have, um, you know, these masterpiece projects that basically are what they, they're passionate about and have been passionate about and, and shown, um, you know, a great ability and all of that.

Uh, and they create these projects that are just absolutely incredible. I mean, one, one student I can think of who was very into theater, um, she put together her own, um, her own show that was essentially, not even, essentially, it was completely done by all teenagers, um, from the writing and producing and directing and acting, and has been able to put it up, uh, to two sold out shows in, uh, in Manhattan, in New York City. Wow. And I know she's, she's still moving forward with that. But, um, you know, obviously an endeavor like that requires a multitude of skills, you know, from, from business sense to leadership and teamwork, to being able to understand, um, you know, just the craft itself and how to story, tell and be a good writer and all of these things.

Um, and, and that's what I think for me is one of the coolest things is going to Austin and seeing these high school kids in person. They are just lit up. They are very, uh, I mean, they're just super present when you talk to them and you can kind of feel the excitement about what they're doing with every single day. The high school kids, in fact, um, uh, at the end of this past school year, had a vote to see whether they would keep school open for the summer, and they voted yes. Uh, overwhelmingly just so that they could have the facilities and each other to be able to continue to work on these projects. And, uh, and they're, I mean, they're just amazing.

They're, another one of my favorites is, uh, is a kid who was really into to biking and built, um, a mountain bike park in Texas that is now the biggest mountain bike park in Texas and was able to raise something a little over \$3 million in order to get that off the ground his senior year of high school. And, um, it continues to be something that he's into at this point as well. But again, it all stemmed from that, that initial passion, you know, something that he had discovered, um, leading up to that. Uh, and again, it takes all sorts of different skills and, and talents and, you know, little individual efforts to get something like that off the ground as well.

Um, so it really takes the shape of whatever it is that, um, and that all ties all the way back to the very beginning in terms of like, what is it that motivates a kid? What is it that gets them going? That's all part of what we cultivate over the course of the, you know, the eight or 12 years depending on, on which school you're in, uh, all the way through graduation.

Stephen McBride: What do you think is, is possible in the world? I mean, when, when this model scales up, because we're talking on the, the order of dozens or hundreds of kids right now, but when you get to thousands, tens of thousands more, it just seems like these kids are going to have such a head start and they're going to be able to build things that were unimaginable for kids going through normal skills. So how do you think about that?

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, I mean, I, for me, I think it's one of the, one of the things that makes me most excited about being here is just, you know, I think having human beings be able to discover what it is that really makes them tick. Like really understand what drives them and what their passions are, and then being able to also cultivate the skills required to get that passion out there into the world. Um, I mean that to me, that's the way you change the world for the better. You know, if you have people who are deeply engaged in what they're doing and love what they're doing and, um, creating something of value for the world around them.

Um, I mean that, that's kind of the key to everything. So the more that we can, the more that we can instill that in as many, um, kids as a part of our educational system as possible. I mean, that to me is the ultimate goal for sure.

Stephen McBride: It seems like Alpha School, I instills problem solving and agency into the kids. What other skills do you think will, will arise in status going forward in the era of, you know, AI can do all the market analysis for you and can do all these things? What, what do you think are the most important? Skills to basically teach the kids going forward.

Jonathon Stewart: Sure. I mean, I think for me, well, I mean, we'll talk about the AI for a second too. I mean, I think having the fundamental skills of, of um, you know, being able to critically think and to be able to evaluate what AI is doing and what AI output, whether it's good or bad, being able to understand, like writing that you see whether it's good or bad. Is an essential part of being able to utilize, um, you know, generative AI technology, for example. Um, in terms of, uh, in terms of, sorry, say that question one more time.

Stephen McBride: You just, yeah, just basically it seems like Alpha Alpha really teaches the kids problem solving and an agency what...

Jonathon Stewart: Oh yeah. The other skills. Yeah, sure, sure, sure. Yeah. So in it, so that was my first point. So it was just with the AI itself, but beyond that, um, I think that socialization, I think that relationship building, some of these really core human, um, you know, skills that are actually cultivated at alpha, um, will be more important than ever. Uh, you know, I think we as, as a, as human beings need to be able to understand how to communicate with one another. We need to understand, um, how to work together. Uh, and we need to understand how to, you know, in endeavors like this to be leaders as well, so that they're all, the skills are sort of, kind of tied in there.

And then I also think the, the other, you know, potentially one of the very most important things is grit and resilience. Being able to, um, you know, take something difficult in front of you and not give up. I mean, that is sort of the common denominator for success in so many different aspects of the way that we live our lives. So, um, you know, and that's something that is, again,

it's instilled from a super young age and it's practiced over and over and over and over again to where it becomes sort of second nature and that, uh, especially in a world where, you know, who knows what the world is gonna look like in 10 years or five years. Um, being able to, to have that sort of problem solving that tenacity and willingness to push forward with things, being able to communicate well with others, like those are all, um, preparing kids to be ready for whatever it's, that comes around.

Stephen McBride: Have you done any studies or have any data on how, uh, you know, kids with specific learning disability disabilities, like dyslexia or whatever, how, how they can use these tools? Does it differ in any way?

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, for sure. So we, we talk about it all the time, and I think one of the, one of the most important things is that the model itself, um, lends itself to, um, you know, an individualized plan. Um, being able to have time that you need, you know, different amounts of time is no problem. Being able to, um, have material that meets kids exactly where it is. Um, and again, just the, the model, the motivational model as well. Um, being able to have a different, different space. You know, it's not kids lined up in desks and rows.

So, um, all of those things just from a, from an organic standpoint, we have seen, um, are, you know, kind of the first steps in being able to, to, you know, meet kids that have ADHD or that kind of thing, um, uh, you know, at a place where they are able to be more successful, just from the very outset. Um, it, you know, it, it definitely, and then I think also just being able to, to have that, that that teacher that in a capacity that is different than a traditional teacher who is there to, to support and offer motivation through the whole process has also proven to be, um, really valuable for, for, for kids there as well.

Stephen McBride: Uh, you know, a, a big part of Bloom's two Sigma problem was obviously the one-on-one tutoring, but a part of that, I believe, was also the mastery learning. Um, how important is it for a student to master a concept before they move on? How do you even measure that and you, why is that so rare in normal skills?

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, I mean, I think it's, it's rare. I'll answer that in reverse. I think it's rare in normal schools because, um, you know, you, you get it at a certain grade level, right? You get a certain set of skill at a certain point in the year, at a certain grade. And if you, if you're not there, or if you're not engaged, or if something like COVID hits, um, it creates holes.

And, uh, the importance of being able to master a bunch of the fundamental things, especially, you know, when it comes to reading or, you know, basic math skills. If you miss out on those things, then you're missing out on everything else that is taught. You know, as the grades progress and as the curriculum progresses in a traditional school, um, you can't learn science in eighth grade if you don't know how to read. And so, you know, and obviously you can't progress through any sort of, um, high level mathematics if you don't have the basics down.

Um, so that, you know, being able to master those concepts before moving on to the next one, that mastery based learning is essential and it is measured, I mean, to a t that's, you know, back to what I was talking about before. We're able to see, you know, down to the, you know,

individual skill sets that are being, um, uh, worked on by kids, uh, through, through the model we see when they're able to complete those and aren't, they're not able to move on until they do complete those.

So, um, you know, it's definitely measured on a daily basis, uh, and tracked according to the, you know, the maps, the map tests as we go to make sure that there are no gaps or holes there. But by virtue of being able to meet every kid in every subject where they are, then, um, kids are able and, and going at, at two x they're able to catch up, uh, where they may have deficits and, um, you know, still be at the same, you know, age level, grade level as they are, um, uh, age-wise as well.

Stephen McBride: Just, just talk a little bit more about that catch up, because I feel like when a lot of people hear about Alva schools, oh hey, it's for parents who want to accelerate their kids that already get top grades and want to excel even more. But you could argue it's even more important for kids that might be behind a little bit in subjects, right?

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, for sure. And I think the more common case even is that, um, is that kids aren't at the same level in every subject across the board, is that they, they do have a staggered sort of, um, you know, approach to it. And yeah, the, again, the catching up part. That's, you know, if someone is behind grade level, um, to begin with, that is the, the first thing that, that we tackle is like, all right, let's get you up to speed. Let's get you back to these fundamentals that you haven't, um, learned yet. And make sure that those are absolutely down pat and then build from there.

And by virtue of being able to move as quickly as they can, um, you know, we've seen kids cover entire grade levels in, um, you know, in half a year or less. Um, you know, the, the amount of hours that it takes to get through a full year's curriculum is, um, you know, surprisingly low when you're in, in some of the, you know, middle or lower school, uh, elementary school grades. Uh, it just, again, it's, it traditionally spread out over such a long period of time over the course of a year. If you take the shackles off of that framework, all of a sudden you're able to catch up way faster, uh, and able to, you know, continue to excel. We see, we see crazy growth even in our 99th percentile kids too. So it does, it does work on both ends of the scale.

Stephen McBride: If you, if you have a 14, 15, 16-year-old, uh, kid that's finished high school curriculum, what, what do they do during those two hours of academics going forward? Is it like we, we move on to college stuff or...

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, I mean, it, it totally depends. I think that, you know, there's a lot of things to spend time on in high school. Um, there's a, there's a big part of making sure that kids are prepped for SATs as well. I think the, the SAT average for this last graduating class was like 1530 or something like that. So pretty, pretty high. Uh, and then, uh, a lot of kids will take APs as well, especially kids that are interested in, um, some of the more elite, um, school, you know, colleges afterwards.

Um, so yeah, again, it's really kind of no ceiling on, on what kids can continue learning. Um, yeah, and you don't, we don't ever find the case that kids get to the end of the 12th grade, uh,

material and all of a sudden they're just like, okay, now what do we do? You know? Um, 'cause there's just, I mean, there's no, there's no end to what you can learn about anything that you're interested in, basically.

Stephen McBride: Have you thought about Alpha College? Would you ever build one?

Jonathon Stewart: That's a great question. Um, I have not been involved in any conversations recently about that as a, as a possibility, but I do know that, um, there are, there are some institutions around the country that, collegiate institutions that are looking at building, um, you know, this, this academic model into their, into their, um, into their curriculum essentially.

Um, and certainly it's been discussed, you know, we had the, the, um Dean for the School of Education, um, at Stanford come in to talk. And there are a lot of, there's a lot of discussion about how to leverage AI in a way that is not just having kids use chat GPT and cheat, which they are doing, um, but being able to truly leverage AI in a way that, um, you know, will be an improvement for education across the board. So we're, those kinds of conversations are going on all the time. Just trying to, you know, continually move forward with things and, and, uh, see where, you know, see where we can take it.

Stephen McBride: You mentioned the kids don't get homework earlier. Um, talk me through the decision to do that. And I feel like, um, when you're selling Alpha School to, to parents, that's maybe number one off the top.

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, no, I think the, it's a question we get every time. Um, I'm out talking to families. Um, and yeah, I mean the, the philosophy is really that, um, we want kids to be focused during that time in the morning and want to be able to take data from that morning to say, okay, we're moving at two x or faster in order to be able to get through academics, be able to, um, build that success mindset in academics.

And, um, you know, if you're going home and having to spend four hours to catch up on those things, then it kind of invalidates the whole, the whole idea or the whole model. So it really is, um, it's just a, it's sort of baked in organically to the way that we do things. And so, you know, from that standpoint, there isn't a need for the homework.

Stephen McBride: How do you think about applying this whole model to, to tutoring adults?

Jonathon Stewart: That is a great question. Uh, it's funny, we talk about the things that, um, you know, we've talked to so many parents who are like, I wish I could go back and do this, or I wish I could do this now. Um, it's a great question. I mean, I think, uh, just personally, I think continuing education for adults is a, you know, it's what keeps us alive. It's what keeps us moving forward and, and innovating and coming up with new ideas.

Uh, there's no particular, uh, you know, specific model that I'm aware of that we've been discussing for, for adult education just yet. But, you know, I think with the platform and the flexibility that it offers. Um, you know, we're definitely exploring all kinds of different ways to, to put it into good use. So that's a, that's a good idea. Steven, maybe I should come on board.

Stephen McBride: Um, listen, I mean, I, I hope Alpha really expands, you know, rapidly, but you're probably on about rolling out dozens, maybe, uh, really optimistically hundreds of skills over the next couple of years where there's thousands of skills in America. Do you feel like there's any adoption or willingness to adopt these tools in traditional skills. And, uh, you know, it seems like from a top down perspective, that's maybe a lost cause. But, you know, getting these tools like these into the hands of individual tutors from the ground up, do you think that's something that, that can happen? Where's your, where's your head with at all that.

Jonathon Stewart: Well, for sure. I mean, I think the, the idea is, I mean, you know, adoption of a new way of doing things, especially something that's as ingrained as education is in terms of just the preconceptions that we carry with us, mostly from our own educations, which are 10 or 20 or 30 or 40 years behind the, behind us. So that adoption thing is real. It definitely, you know, there, there are people, there are people who sort of get it quicker and, and are ready to try something new. Uh, and then there are people who are, are really need to, need to see more, more of it in action, need to understand exactly how it works and be able to really dive into, um, to all the things that we're talking about today, and also see it in action.

So I, you know, there are initiatives, I know, um, where we are, um, looking at getting into public schools and private schools that are not specifically alphas across the, across our country at least. Um, and certainly looking at, um, opportunities to expand, um, globally as well. So it's, uh, it is all, it is all something that, um, we believe in, you know, the, the way that it's working. We believe in just transforming the lives of the kids that are part of the, um, you know, part of the system. It's, it is really what keeps us going.

Stephen McBride: Uh, I wanna, I know we're gearing towards closing here, Jonathon. I want to address two pushbacks. So, uh, one, one pushback I hear is, oh, hey, this is just kids steering iPads all day. It's gonna make them lazy. It's going to turn them into zombies.

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, sure. Um, I guess the, the easy pushback on that is that it's not that, um, you know, the, the academic time is with screens in the morning, but again, as we talked about, it's 25, 25 minute, um, very concentrated, very engaged, uh, learning sessions. And the rest of the time is not in front of screens. It is, it is there's a lot of physical activity, there's a lot of movement and moving around. There's a lot of working together as teams.

Um, you know, we talk about the fact that in the traditional school there's actually incidents of more screens than we have at Alpha, which is sort of the irony in terms of us being the robot, zombie iPad school or whatever. Um, and you know, we talk about the, the fact also that there's a huge difference between good screen time and bad screen time as well. Um, it's not like kids are, are doing, you know, when they're, when they're on screens, they're academically super engaged and not scrolling through social media or, you know, uh, or anything. But it's, it's all totally directed towards their academics. So that's a, that's a pretty easy one. I think it's just, I, it stems probably just from, from misunderstanding how the, how the system actually works.

Stephen McBride: The second big pushback I hear is, oh my God, you're gonna put all these teachers out of a job. How could you do that?

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah. That's, you know, there were headlines I think probably a year ago that were basically like the school with no teachers and, um, you know, the, the, again, the obvious pushback on that one is that the teachers are what make it all work. Uh, our teachers are, are world class. They come from so many different backgrounds, uh, education being one of them, of course, but they are all, um, they're all rock stars at what they do. And, um, you know, it's, we're, we're definitely not in the business of putting teachers out of business. We're in the business of finding the best educators in the world and, um, you know, putting them to work with our kids. And, um, so I don't, you know, again, I think it's just a misunderstanding of of what is actually happening at the schools, where that comes from. But, um, yeah, it, the, the humans in this, uh, equation are absolutely essential. And, um, and, you know, the, the beating heart of the, of the schools in a lot of way.

Stephen McBride: I'm sure parents are gonna be listening to this right now and saying, oh my God, I want to sign my, my kid up for alpha skill. But they probably live in an area that they might not be, you might not be there yet. What advice would you give them specifically to things to do today? Things they can do to, you know, even prep their kids to try to get them ahead.

Jonathon Stewart: Yeah, for sure. I mean, I think the, I think part of it is really just, um, you know, motiva, you know, again, I'll come back to that motivation part, is to really find what, what makes a kid sit up and light up and be engaged. Um, because it's when kids are, when kids are bored or they're, um