

From Emotional Reactivity to Self-Confidence:

Eight Years of Supported Learning and
Interventions that Opened the Door to
the High School Track Team within District



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Our Student Profile

The student enrolled into Alpha School in 2017 at eight years of age after experiencing significant challenges succeeding within a traditional educational setting. At the time of admission, emotional and behavioral dysregulation substantially impacted his ability to participate successfully in classroom instruction, develop peer relationships, and navigate everyday school routines. Challenging behaviors included aggression toward peers and staff, screaming, throwing objects, noncompliance, and emotional shutdowns when faced with disappointment or frustration. Even seemingly minor events—such as not being first in line, losing a game, or receiving an undesired lunch—could quickly escalate into behaviors requiring intensive staff intervention.

While these behaviors presented significant obstacles, staff recognized a bright and capable student whose emotional regulation skills had not yet developed to match his cognitive abilities. Over the next eight years, Alpha School would collaborate with the student and his family to build the behavioral, social, and emotional skills necessary for long-term success. This was a foundation built from trust in our experienced staff of special education professionals.

The student's success resulted from years of coordinated intervention that evolved alongside his developmental needs.

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Working Through the Challenges from Elementary to Middle School Years

The Elementary Years

During his elementary years, the student's greatest obstacle was emotional regulation. Everyday disappointments often resulted in frustration that interfered with learning, social interactions, and classroom participation. Competitive situations, unexpected changes, and perceived failures frequently triggered behavioral episodes, making it difficult for him to engage successfully alongside his peers.

The educational team intentionally modified the classroom environment to reduce unnecessary behavioral triggers while explicitly teaching coping strategies and emotional regulation. Public behavior systems that unintentionally reinforced competition were replaced with **individualized reinforcement plans**. **Cooperative classroom activities** replaced many competitive experiences, and **staff consistently reinforced self-advocacy, appropriate peer interactions, and positive coping skills**. Students worked together toward shared classroom goals, helping foster collaboration instead of comparison.

The students emotional regulation and coping skills developed gradually — built through consistent instruction, practice, reinforcement, and repeated chances to apply them.

During his elementary years, our classroom shifted toward a more non-competitive approach. This entailed using “kindness rewards” which removed the competitive elements supported with “private points sheets” so that the student could see their progress without it being known by the entire class publicly.

The student showed he had internalized these coping strategies by independently teaching them to younger and newer students, explaining the concepts in his own words and from his own perspective.

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The Middle School Years Onward

As the student entered adolescence, interventions shifted from reducing frustration to developing resilience.

As the student matured and his emotional regulation improved, his challenges evolved. By the middle school years, disruptive behaviors had significantly decreased, allowing the educational team to focus on a different set of objectives:

Helping him
understand the value
of perseverance

Personal
responsibility

Academic effort
and resilience

Rather than simply reducing behaviors, the focus shifted toward preparing him for the increased independence and expectations of high school.

Healthy competition became a teaching tool rather than something to avoid.

Staff encouraged him to focus on personal growth, setting achievable goals, and recognizing that meaningful progress comes through consistent effort rather than immediate success.

The student showed he had internalized these coping strategies by independently teaching them to younger and newer students, explaining the concepts in his own words and from his own perspective. Again, this approach also helped to nurture social skill building over time.

His emotional regulation and coping skills developed gradually — built through consistent instruction, practice, natural consequences, positive reinforcement, and repeated chances to apply them.

Recognizing one of the student's greatest strengths, educators incorporated his interest and talent in video games into instruction by providing opportunities for him to coach classmates and teach strategies to peers. These types of social interactions have proven to build leadership opportunities, strengthen communication skills, patience, confidence, and sense of responsibility while allowing him to experience success through helping others.

In some ways, these types of interventions help to build a sense of empathy between one student to another.

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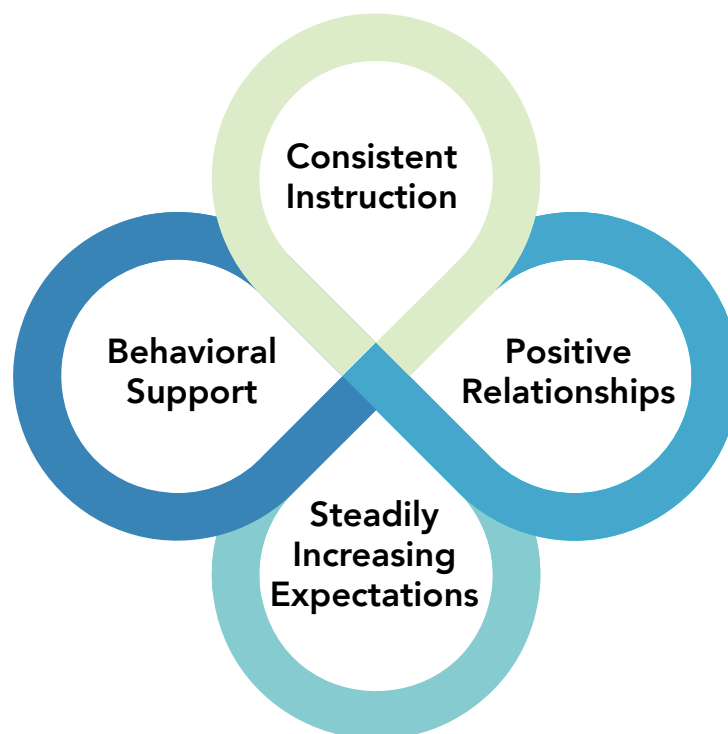
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Progress and Outcomes

Over the course of eight years, the student's growth was both remarkable and sustained. The elementary-aged student who once struggled to manage everyday disappointments gradually developed effective coping strategies, stronger frustration tolerance, and significantly improved emotional regulation. He learned to communicate his feelings appropriately, advocate for his needs, and develop meaningful friendships with peers. Situations that once resulted in aggression became opportunities to practice self-control, problem-solving, and resilience.

By his middle school years, the student's confidence had matured alongside his behavioral skills. He demonstrated greater willingness to work through challenging academic tasks and began to have a deeper understanding that success is achieved through effort and persistence. His growing maturity was further reflected in his ability to mentor classmates, patiently teach peers, and use his own strengths to support the learning of others.

**These accomplishments were not the result of a single breakthrough
Rather, they reflected years of four key components.**



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Transition to High School Back in District: From A Least Restrictive Classroom Environment to the Track Team.

In June 2025, after attending Alpha School from eight years of age through the completion of middle school, the student successfully transitioned to his home school district to continue high school.

Perhaps the most meaningful example of his growth came through participation in high school athletics. As an elementary student, simply losing a classroom game or race often resulted in significant emotional dysregulation. By high school, he voluntarily joined the track team—an activity requiring perseverance, discipline, emotional regulation, and the ability to compete while accepting both victory and disappointment.

His participation in track symbolized far more than athletic involvement. It was evidence of years of growth in resilience, confidence, self-control, and the ability to embrace challenges that had once felt overwhelming.

Key Takeaways for Families and Professionals: Interventions that evolved to meet his changing developmental needs.

This student's example illustrates that meaningful behavioral growth often occurs over the course of years rather than months. The dedication of our highly-trained highly trained and supportive staff, in conjunction with the patience that goes along with this, has lead led to these results for this particular student. The student progressed from an eight-year-old child entering Alpha School with significant challenges in a traditional district placement to a confident adolescent prepared to return to his home district for his high school years.

The success of this transition reflects more than improved behavior. It represents the cumulative impact of individualized instruction, consistent behavioral supports, collaborative teamwork, and relationships built over time. By addressing foundational emotional regulation first and gradually increasing expectations for independence, we helped prepare this student not only to return to a less restrictive educational setting, but to do so with the confidence, resilience, and self-advocacy skills needed to continue succeeding beyond the classroom.

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About RKS Associates

Since 1980, RKS Associates has been a leader in providing the needs of special education students here in New Jersey. Our focus has been to create schools that provide a safe and nurturing environment for children with a variety of disabilities.

RKS Associates prides itself on fostering a safe and welcoming environment for every student through our network of special education schools in New Jersey. We invite you to come and experience a wide variety of opportunities, including therapy services, nursing, counseling, psychiatric consultation and support on a variety of levels, BCBA support, ABA services, adaptive physical education, art, music, transition, community-based instruction, and job sampling. We also incorporate an extended year program with the full range of services which enables the students to experience continuity in their special needs.

Please visit any of our three schools listed below to see for yourself just how comprehensive our programs are for children with special needs across a range of learning, social, language and behavioral challenges. Our goals are to help each and every student reach their fullest potential.



www.alphaschool.com



www.thegatewayschool.com



www.harborschool.com

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