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GETTING READY TO FEEL READY

TRANSITION DAYS: THE SMALL STEPS THAT MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE WHEN A NEW SCHOOL YEAR IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER

There's nothing quite like walking into a new classroom for the first time. The colours, the voices, the sense that everything is just beginning. For children starting at DESS Academic City this September, that moment has been brought a step closer by a series of Transition Days designed to make new spaces feel like home before the school year even begins.

For our Foundation Stage 1 and 2 learners, the experience began at Woo-hoo! in Dubai, where education met play in a purpose-built space full of hands-on activities. The children explored, painted, listened to stories, and, just as importantly, met the classmates they'll grow up with.

Older students moving into Years 1 to 6 had their own transition experience, this time at DESS College. Organised into classroom groups, they spent time with their peers and future teachers through games, short creative tasks and a chance to get to know one another. We made it fun, light-touch, but purposeful and hope that it helped to replace unknowns with familiarity and gave confidence a head start.





These essential confidence and connection-building days are not just for children coming to DESS for the first time. Many children are moving across from DESS Oud Metha and they're going through the same process of adjustment. Different buildings, different teachers, new names to learn. Transition Days offer something steady for everyone, regardless of where they start.

Why does it matter? Because the first day of school shouldn't feel like a cold plunge. Transition Days give children the chance to meet their peers, find their feet and connect with their teachers. It's a practical step, but also a gentle one, designed to reduce anxiety, build early relationships, and help children walk in feeling ready.

WHAT LEARNING LOOKS LIKE

INSIDE THE CLASSROOMS WHERE INDEPENDENCE, CURIOSITY, AND COLLABORATION COME NATURALLY

Walk into a classroom at DESS Academic City and the first thing you'll notice is what's missing. There are no rigid rows. No front of the room. No single way to sit, listen, or learn. Instead, there's space; deliberate, open space designed to move with the child, not box them in.

This is what Headteacher Neil Brinicombe means when he talks about learning environments that "work with children, not just for them." At every turn, the layout speaks to a school built for independence, exploration and a strong sense of self-direction. Students can sit at modular tables for group work, sink into soft furnishings for quiet thinking or stretch out on floor cushions for story time. It's a physical setup that says: you belong here, and how you learn matters.

Designing these kinds of spaces is part instinct, part deep thinking - and a lot of coordination. Operations Manager Lee Cooper, who has overseen procurement for the new campus, describes the process as "less about outfitting a building, more about supporting a philosophy." Every decision, from chairs to charging points, was made with flexibility and child-led learning in mind. The result is a kind of planned looseness: spaces that feel calm but alive, ready for the kind of dynamic learning Neil and his team believe in.





"We've chosen furnishings that allow the room to evolve through the day," Lee explains. "Sometimes it's a circle for group discussion. Sometimes it's breakout zones for independent projects. Sometimes it's just a quiet corner to read and reset. Nothing is nailed down - literally or figuratively."

And while the classrooms are a statement in themselves, they're only part of the story. Step beyond the glass and you'll find outdoor annexes, shaded courtyards, and even a rooftop garden; elements that reflect Neil's broader vision for a school in conversation with its surroundings.

"The desert isn't a backdrop," he says. "It's a teacher."

This "Desert School" philosophy shapes everything from science lessons rooted in local ecology to mindfulness sessions held beneath vast skies. The natural world becomes part of the curriculum, not an occasional excursion from it. And in doing so, the school offers students a rare kind of education; grounded, adventurous and deeply connected to place.

At its heart, this approach to space is about trust. Trusting children to make choices. Trusting teachers to use their instincts. Trusting that learning happens best when the environment invites it, not enforces it.

When it opens, every corner of the school will be ready - not just to house learning, but to host it. Light will pour in. Children will settle onto soft floors, lean into their questions and lift their eyes to what's possible. And in rooms designed to let them be themselves, they'll do what they do best: explore, discover and grow.

A PLACE TO MAKE, EXPLORE AND BELONG

For Debbie West, art has always been a natural way to portray emotion and celebrate creativity. As a teacher, she sees it not just as a subject, but as a unique way for children to express themselves, and to make sense of their ideas, their emotions and the world around them. Her goal is simple: to give every child the skills, space and confidence to create in their own way.

She started her career in Brighton, working across the early and primary years. Over time, her path has stretched far beyond the UK. She's taught in Arizona, and travelled to Cambodia with her daughter to support a school in Siem Reap. The trip, prompted by a fundraising project her six-year-old had started, gave Debbie the chance to work with local teachers and share strategies around phonics. She still calls it one of the most humbling experiences of her career.

Back in Brighton, she combined teaching with lecturing on BEd and PGCE courses and played a hands-on role in the city's annual Children's Parade, an initiative that helps young people bring big ideas to life in front of a crowd.

She arrived at DESS Oud Metha in 2019, stepping into the role of Art Leader just as schools around the world were about to face their toughest test. When COVID hit, Debbie took on a new challenge, becoming a remote learning teacher for Year 1 students who were unable to return to school.

Working remotely for a full year called for creativity, empathy and a willingness to adapt - skills she still draws on in her teaching today.





Now back in the art room, Debbie works with every year group across the school. She also supports teachers with art across the wider curriculum and leads the set design for the annual Year 6 productions. Her art room is designed to be a child-led, non-judgemental zone where exploration is encouraged, mistakes are part of the process and every voice is celebrated.

At DESS, every child is an artist - it's about building confidence, curiosity and joy through creativity.

As she prepares for her new leadership role at Dess Academic City, Debbie's belief is that the art room should feel safe, welcoming and full of possibility. A place where every child can surprise themselves. It's where the magic happens! Art will be a vibrant and vital part of school life for the children at DESS.

Away from school, she shares her passion for creativity and travel with her family; husband Oliver and daughter Elsie. Elsie, who joined DESS Oud Metha in Year4 and is now in Year9 at DESS College, has the same artistic streak and together they've explored a long list of countries that keeps growing. When she's not painting or planning lessons, Debbie's often training at the gym. She's recently started signing up for fitness competitions, including Hyrox and Battle Cancer. "They're tough," she says, "but there's something satisfying about stepping outside your comfort zone."

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BUILDING BOLD THINKERS, ONE BIG QUESTION AT A TIME

Curiosity has always been Aisling Fichtner's compass - whether leading summer camps through Irish woodlands, isolating plant enzymes in a lab or designing hands-on science lessons in international classrooms. With a degree in Biochemistry and an early career in enzyme research, Aisling retrained as a secondary Chemistry teacher in the UK, drawn more to people than petri dishes. She's never looked back.

Her love of learning began early. As a child, she explored nature with her dad, collecting autumn treasures, sketching butterflies and getting lost in library books. As a teenager, she coached tennis and led nature camps, sharing her joy of discovery with younger children. That early fascination with the natural world evolved into a belief that learning should always feel joyful, no matter the subject or age group.

That spirit of curiosity has taken her across three continents and into classrooms shaped by the British, IB and American NGSS systems. Her teaching has spanned secondary labs, early years environments, outdoor camps and creative curriculum design, often blending the academic with the practical to bring concepts vividly to life.

She arrived in the UAE in 2008, just months before the birth of her eldest daughter. She and her husband had spent years travelling across South and North America, Europe, Asia and Australia, experiences that were often exciting and, at times, deeply humbling. What was meant to be a relocation became a long-term home, and her growing family; four children, a lively assortment of pets and a shared passion for travel; have made the most of what Dubai has to offer.

Alongside her academic work, Aisling has developed a deep interest in emotional wellbeing. She has trained in areas such as personality theory and interpersonal development and brings that insight into her classroom. "I've always felt drawn to helping people when they're not feeling their best," she says. "My husband and I both believe in building others up; spotting what someone's great at and helping them grow from there. That's what drives my love of teaching."

In her new role as Innovation Teacher at DESS Academic City, Aisling is helping shape a bold, child-centred vision for learning. Her approach goes beyond Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Maths (STEAM). It's about fostering imagination, problem-solving and real-world connection across every subject, from art to science, sport to language. With specialist spaces including an innovations lab, cookery room and desert garden, the physical tools are in place, but for Aisling, it's the people who will make the difference.

"Innovation is about helping children see the world as something they can shape," she explains. "It's not about ticking boxes; it's about letting them ask questions, build ideas and learn through doing."

Aisling sees DESS as more than a family of schools; she sees it as a living ecosystem of ideas and people, all learning from one another. "We're always learning - as teachers, as a team, and as a community. What matters most is that we stay open, reflective and willing to grow together. When we do that, our children thrive too, because, in the end, it's the people who shape the journey."



DESS | PRIMARY PULSE

MAKING SPACE FOR EVERY CHILD

Juliette Browning knows what a difference school can make when children feel like they belong. After two decades in the classroom, shaped by curiosity, care and a strong foundation in child development, she's now leading inclusion at DESS Academic City. It's a new chapter built on years of working closely with children and families.

She started teaching in Farnham, Surrey, after studying Psychology and completing her PGCE at the University of Exeter. Since then, she's taught 20 different classes, led on Maths and Enrichment, mentored trainee teachers and completed her SENCO qualification. She joined DESS in 2012 and has been a valued part of the school's Key Stage 2 team ever since.

Her approach is clear. Inclusion is not an add-on or a quiet corner. It's a mindset that shapes how children learn, how teachers teach and how a school builds a culture of belonging.



WHEN WE UNDERSTAND
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At DESS Academic City, that mindset is built into the design. Every block includes sensory and support spaces. The new Learning Zone will provide a dedicated home for a skilled, close-knit team focused on helping children grow with confidence. Juliette is leading that team, and helping to shape a school environment where every child's strengths are recognised and supported.

She also places high value on partnership with parents. "When we understand a child well, we can help them to fulfil their potential and truly thrive at school," she says. "That starts with listening to families and building trust."

Juliette has called Dubai home since 2007. It's where she met her husband, where she's raising two daughters and where she continues to learn from the children she teaches. Outside of school, she loves to travel and is rarely far from a good book.



THE LITTLE BOOKS THAT MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

WHY THE PARENT HANDBOOKS ARE YOUR GO-TO GUIDES FOR STARTING STRONG AT DESS ACADEMIC CITY

Starting at a new school can bring a mix of excitement and questions. What time does the gate open? How do lunchboxes work? Who do I contact if my child is unwell? That's where the Parent Handbook comes in, not just as a reference, but as a guide to feeling prepared.

Soon, families joining our brand new DESS Academic City will receive their first edition of this essential resource. Closely modelled on the well-established DESS Oud Metha versions, the three Handbooks (FS1, FS2 and Years 1-6) gather everything parents need to know in one place.

They cover the practical details: school timings, uniforms, contact information and what to pack each day. But just as importantly, they offer a sense of how the school works, from how learning is structured to how children are supported in the classroom and beyond.

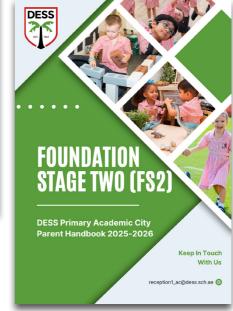


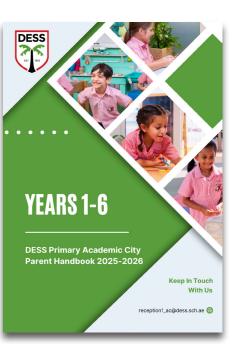
You'll find guidance on safeguarding and wellbeing, an introduction to the Invent, Explore, Inspire curriculum and suggestions for home learning. They also outline DESS's approach to digital literacy, inclusion and everyday routines that help children settle in and thrive.

What makes each Handbook useful isn't just what's in it, but how it helps families feel connected. Whether you're joining our DESS family for the first time or moving over to the new school from DESS Oud Metha, this is the place to start.

Look out for the 2025–2026 DESS Academic City Parent Handbook in your inbox soon. It's a simple document with a clear goal: helping you and your child feel ready, informed and part of the school community from day one.







THE FINAL PUSH

HOW THE SITE IS POWERING TOWARD THE FINISH LINE

Last time we checked in with Alaa Al Jbae, Resident Engineer with lead consultants Graphite, the school was taking shape in broad strokes. Roofs rising, steel structures setting the frame, and a site team growing fast in both numbers and momentum. A year earlier, it had been sand and snakes.

Fast forward a few months and the energy on site has shifted again. If the first phase was about building bones, this one's about breathing life into them.

"All the roof slabs have been cast," Alaa explains, "so now the real transformation begins." That means interior finishes, services installations and specialist touches - from ceiling grids and wall panels to the piping that will keep classrooms cool and safe. It's a phase where you begin to see rooms taking on personality, not just purpose.

Work is now underway across all blocks, inside and out. Teams are plastering walls, laying flooring, installing fire safety systems and finishing off the boundary wall that wraps around the school. And it's not just about what's inside. External landscaping has started too, setting the stage for shaded walkways, green spaces, and the open, flowing campus feel that will define each child's experience.



IT'S ALL ABOUT FINISH, DETAIL, AND COORDINATION. THE GOAL IS FULL READINESS FOR HANDOVER IN AUGUST ??



"We're entering the most important stretch now," says Alaa. "It's all about finish, detail and coordination. The goal is full readiness for handover in August."

That means testing every system, checking every fitting and securing the all-important Building Completion Certificate. With each passing week, rooms are moving from blueprint to reality; hallways filled not with hard hats, but the sense of something nearly ready.

For Alaa and the team, it's a push built on pride. And with September in sight, the site is no longer just a project. It's a school in waiting.

