

Primary pulse

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STUDENTS ON SITE:
TURNING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

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DESIGNS ON THE FUTURE:

COLLEGE STUDENTS GET AN INSIDE LOOK AT DESS PRIMARY ACADEMIC CITY

Before the paint's even dry, DESS Primary Academic City is already inspiring the next generation of innovators.

Earlier this week, Year 12 Design and Technology students from DESS College stepped onto the new campus for a hands-on site visit as part of their ongoing coursework and a deeper dive into the world of design, engineering and large-scale project development.

Accompanied by teachers Mr Dorgan and Mr Kiely, the students were given a full health and safety briefing before donning their hard hats and exploring the site in action.

So much more than just sightseeing, this was primary research in action. From materials to workflows to the sheer scale of decision-making involved, students were able to see first-hand how architecture and engineering intersect to create spaces for learning, play and community.

"This was the kind of opportunity you don't find in textbooks," said Patrick Rouse, DESS Trustee and Chair of the schools' Facilities & Site Management Sub-Committee - and the driving force behind the project. "The students were switched on, engaged and genuinely curious, asking smart questions and linking what they saw to their own design studies. It was impressive."



In the world of Design & Technology, primary research - that is, direct observation and real-world engagement, can be the difference between a good project and a standout one. Seeing a working site provides invaluable insight into everything from health and safety to material selection, environmental considerations and even the cultural and logistical realities of construction in the UAE.

For Mr Dorgan, the visit offered more than just a curriculum link. "It was a chance to show them what future-forward design actually looks like in practice," he said. "There's a lot of theory in D&T, but seeing the scale, the sequencing and the precision of a live site really drives it home."

Students responded in kind. From noting the intricacies of structural reinforcements to discussing the environmental considerations of glazing and layout, they threw themselves into the experience. "We were blown away by how naturally they engaged with the space," said Mr Kiely. "We could tell that they weren't just observing, they were analysing."

The trip also left a deeper impression. "It really made me think differently about how buildings are designed with people in mind," said one Year 12 student. "You could see the decisions being made to shape how kids will move through the space and how it'll feel to learn there."

As site visits go, it was a rare one: local, live, and layered with relevance. A glimpse of the future - not just for the school, but perhaps for a few future architects too!

PLANNING THE SCHOOL RUN: SMARTER ROADS FOR A SMOOTHER START

Ask any parent what makes a school drop-off stressful, and the answer rarely has anything to do with packed lunches or forgotten bags. It's traffic. Road systems. Parking. That feeling of crawling through a bottleneck when the clock's ticking and patience is wearing thin.

For our new school, those concerns haven't just been heard, they've been stitched securely into the access plan.

"We know this is one of the big issues for families," says DESS College Principal Chris Vizzard. "Which is exactly why we've prioritised it from the very beginning."



A Roadmap Designed for Real Life

From day one, the new campus will benefit from its own dedicated road system. That means parents and staff won't need to share access points with school buses or DESS College-bound traffic. Separate routes are already under construction, designed to ensure that the flow of vehicles in and out of the new Primary school site remains smooth, efficient and safe.

This is more than just good planning - it's now a requirement. All new school builds must now provide independent access, and DESS Primary Academic City is fully compliant with this updated standard.

Easy Access, Better Flow

Parents will be able to approach the school from all main routes, with multiple options for drop-off and pick-up. Parking will be ample, with space for those who want to walk their children into school. Importantly, all of this has been designed to work in harmony with the surrounding traffic, minimising pressure on DESS College access roads and keeping the new school day running to time. And, although the access arrangements for the school and college will be separate, we will be facilitating a drop-off system for those who have children at both.



Built-In Breathing Room

What's also unique about this project is the flexibility that comes with its location. Unlike more urban campuses, Academic City offers space - and with that, the opportunity to test and refine. "We have the chance to get this right," said Chris. "And we'll use the first term to monitor, listen and improve."

The decision not to open the school at full capacity in the first year is a deliberate one. It allows the team to fine-tune operations like traffic flow and parking in real time, without the pressure of a full-scale roll-out.

"We're asking for a little patience as we optimise these systems," added Chris. "But parents can expect a calm, straightforward start and finish to their day."

Looking Ahead

For many families, the school run frames the day, setting the tone for what follows. That's why we've treated traffic flow as a fundamental part of school design, not an afterthought.

The roads may not always be the most glamorous part of a new school story. But for the families who will drive them every day, they're an essential piece of the puzzle, and one this school is working hard to get right.

THE DESS LEADERSHIP TEAM: OUR CULTURAL ARCHITECTS

Walk into any great primary school, and you'll feel it before you see it. It's in the warmth of the classrooms, the energy in the corridors, the playtime giggles. It's not just what's being taught, it's how. And more often than not, that culture is being shaped not just from the top down, but from within.

When our new DESS Primary Academic City opens its doors, culture won't be an abstract idea. We will make it a daily practice. And the ones leading it will not only be the members of our Senior Leadership Team, but a strong leadership team who will help us to strengthen and build on our existing standards of excellence.

An Invisible Thread

"At DESS culture is not just a buzzword, it's the heartbeat of everything we do," says DESS Principal Catherine Dando. It is the invisible thread that weaves through our classrooms, outdoor learning and playgrounds, shaping every experience and interaction. Culture at DESS is the environment we intentionally create; rich with strong relationships, a powerful sense of belonging, respect and a warm, inclusive family community, deeply rooted in our history and our story.

Our school culture doesn't happen by chance. It is built day by day, moment by moment, through the commitment of every staff member, every child, and every family who walks through our gates. It is defined by how we treat one another, how we collaborate, how we celebrate our diversity, and how we lift each other up. At DESS, we believe that when children feel truly known, valued, and connected, they flourish and learning becomes a fun, active, and inclusive journey."



Leadership Where It Counts

Real school leadership lives in the day-to-day. "It's about creating a sense of belonging and a shared responsibility to uphold our strong legacy," added Mrs Dando. "It's about having a clear vision and sense of purpose and then bringing everyone with you on that journey. It's about authentic relationships and meaningful conversations. Respect, compassion, curiosity and integrity flow through everything we do, from morning greetings on the gate to problem-solving playground conversations.

This is why our leadership team plays such a pivotal role. At DESS, our leaders are cultural architects. They understand the immense responsibility they hold in strengthening and upholding the culture they have inherited. They are stewards of our values and vision, shaping not just strategy and curriculum, but the emotional and social climate of our school.

We take great care in selecting these leaders. Through a rigorous recruitment process and a thoughtful, values-driven staffing strategy, we ensure that each member of our leadership team is aligned with our core beliefs. They share our passion for making learning active, fun, and inclusive. They understand that success at DESS is not just about academic outcomes, it's about creating a community where every child feels inspired, every teacher feels empowered, and every family feels part of something truly special."

Leading in a New Era

The demands on primary schools today go well beyond test scores and timetables. Modern leaders need to be emotionally intelligent, agile, and relentlessly child focused. They need to know how to coach, not just correct. How to build trust, not just track results.

The DESS Primary Academic City model of leadership will be collaborative, responsive, and aligned with the future of education. Not one about hierarchy, but about culture, community, and clarity of purpose.

The People Who Make It Happen

The team profiles in this latest issue of Primary Pulse shine a spotlight on a few more of the professionals who will shape life at our new school. As you will read, they will bring different experiences, specialisms, and stories, but share our common goal of building a school where children, families, and colleagues feel inspired every day.

Because in the end, great schools like ours are built on more than policy. They're built on people. And when the right people are empowered to lead, culture doesn't need to be imposed. It becomes who you are.

FAITH, FUN AND CRITICAL THINKING:

MEET OMAIMA SHAHWAN, HEAD OF ISLAMIC STUDIES



Ask Omaima Shahwan what makes a great Islamic Studies lesson, and she won't hesitate: "Joy. If the children are smiling and engaged, we're already halfway there."

Since 2018, Omaima has led Islamic Studies at DESS Primary Oud Metha with a balance of warmth, wisdom and thoughtful innovation. This September, she brings that same approach to DESS Primary Academic City as well, ensuring the subject continues to grow in relevance and reach.

Born and raised in Jordan, Omaima moved to the UAE in 2002 and has spent over two decades building her educational journey. She holds a degree from Sharjah University, a Master's in Education Innovation from Emirates University, and a PhD from a London college. She's also a qualified coach and published author, though the smile she gets when mentioning her two-year-old granddaughter suggests that titles and accolades aren't what drive her most.

From Head to Heart

Islamic Studies lessons at DESS are short in time but big in impact. With just one or two slots a week, every minute counts. Omaima's approach blends storytelling, group activities and real-life context to bring faith to life. Children rotate through stations that explore Islamic values and daily routines, not just to learn facts, but to discuss, reflect and make connections.

"We don't impose a way of thinking," she says. "We invite curiosity. We show children how these values are lived and let them find their own path to understanding."

Just before Ramadan, an initiative called Ramadan Joy was launched as a celebration designed to spread Islamic values throughout the school community. It was made truly special when Muslim and non-Muslim parents came together, united by a shared purpose to bring joy to the children while nurturing a spirit of respect, kindness, and togetherness. It was a heartwarming reminder of how values can connect us all.

Respect, Not Requirement

In another successful initiative to connect Islamic subjects with other areas of learning, the Islamic team launched A Heart to Complete. Students received half a heart and were asked to write the name of someone in school they appreciate, be it a friend, teacher, or staff member.

They then gifted it to that person, spreading kindness, gratitude, and the Islamic value of appreciation throughout the school. It was a simple yet powerful way to connect hearts and subjects with meaning.



A Journey of Purpose

As she prepares to share her expertise across both Primary schools, Omaima is working closely with the new team to embed her subject in the culture of the school from day one. She's carrying forward the same ethos; child-led, values-driven, full of warmth and discovery.

Her favourite moments are when past children return and talk not just about what they learned, but how it made them feel.

"They remember the joy. That's when you know you've done something that lasts."

FROM FIRST NOTES TO FULL ENSEMBLES: NIAMH MEAD'S VISION FOR PERFORMING ARTS AT DESS

You never quite know where a passion for the performing arts might begin. For Niamh Mead, it all started with a piano stool, a set of tiny hands and a deep love for the instrument that's stayed with her ever since.

"I was about five when I started learning," she recalls. "It just felt so comfortable. From that moment on, I knew I wanted music - and teaching, to be at the centre of everything I did."

Fast forward to today, and that early instinct has grown into a lifelong passion. As the new Head of Performing Arts at DESS Primary Academic City, Niamh brings more than experience - she brings belief. Belief in the power of music. Belief in the magic of theatre. And belief that, when you give children the tools to express themselves, they discover talents they didn't know they had.

A Musical Journey

After studying Music at University College Cork, Niamh went on to gain her PGCE in Music Education from the University of Limerick. Early teaching roles included everything from maternity cover to private tuition, summer roles with music exam boards and even performing at weddings.

In 2012, she spotted a job advert for a Dubai school. One phone interview later, she was offered the role, and two years after arriving in the UAE, she joined the team at DESS Primary Oud Metha. From class teacher to Head of Music and now Head of Performing Arts, Niamh has grown with the school and now looks forward to helping shape its next chapter in Academic City.

A Family Affair

Niamh and husband Chris, who works in sales, have two daughters: Rosie (5) and Grace (3), who will both be joining her at DESS Primary Academic City this September. "It's wonderful to know they'll grow up in an environment where the arts are so valued and celebrated."

And yes, she still smiles every time a student picks up an instrument for the first time. "You don't have to be a born performer," she says. "You just have to give it a go."

At DESS Primary Academic City, under Niamh's guidance, they'll have every chance to do just that.



More Than Just a Stage

Ask Niamh what Performing Arts means in a primary setting, and she doesn't hesitate. "It's where so many children find their feet. Even if they're less confident in some areas of school life, this is a part where they can get involved, puff out their chest and belong."

That sense of belonging runs deep. For many children, it's the first time they hold an instrument, act in a scene or step onto a stage. And while the confidence boost is real, the long-term benefits are just as powerful.

"Performing Arts builds communication, creativity, empathy and it teaches children how to work together, how to listen, how to lead," Niamh explains. "It's not about who sings the loudest. It's about giving every child the confidence to use their voice."

Niamh also believes that involvement in performing arts is linked to higher academic achievement and improved reading comprehension. "The arts cultivate critical thinking and creativity, skills that are transferable across all areas of learning," she explains. "Participating in music, drama, and dance also encourages empathy, collaboration, and self-expression – all of which help students develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others. By integrating the arts into our curriculum, we're not just teaching students to perform; we're equipping them with the tools to navigate and contribute to the world thoughtfully and creatively."

A big fan of musicals, Niamh still gets goosebumps watching *Les Misérables* or *Mary Poppins* - and not just for the talent on display, but for the staging, the atmosphere, the sheer craft behind it all. "It's the technology, the timing, the teamwork that gets to me every time. It all must come together to create something unforgettable."



Room to Express

The new school offers exciting facilities - and plenty of space for rehearsals, performance, and creative exploration. But Niamh is clear: "It's not the buildings that bring Performing Arts to life. It's the children and the teachers inside them who provide the angel dust."

She's especially proud when a child discovers a hidden talent and delighted that several have even gone on to join Dubai's National Youth Orchestra. "There's nothing more rewarding than seeing a child - and their parents, realise they've found something they love, something they're good at."

SINGING IN THE SCHOOLROOM: HOW DANA BZEW BRINGS ARABIC TO LIFE

If you're near Dana Bzew's class on any given morning and you'd be forgiven for wondering if Arabic had swapped rooms with Music. Because inside, Dana doesn't just teach the language, she sometimes sings it.

"Wellbeing is the key - I believe that happy students are successful students. Learning Arabic should feel like an adventure filled with joy, discovery and a strong sense of belonging. When children feel secure, their learning flourishes and if a little song along the way helps, then great!"

As the newly appointed Head of Arabic at DESS Primary Academic City, Dana brings with her a teaching style that's as innovative as it is effective. Rooted in her training in Syria, which included two additional years dedicated to teaching Arabic to children with Special Needs, Dana's approach is refreshingly creative. Phonics replace rote memorisation, visuals support understanding and new words often come with a melody.

"It's a complex language," she admits, "but when children grasp it, they often fall in love with it. The best reward? That smile when they arrive for the next lesson, ready to sing along."



A DESS Family Affair

Teaching may be Dana's passion, but family comes first - and there's been a lot of coordination in recent months. While she's been making her mark at DESS Primary Oud Metha since joining in 2024, her three daughters; Julie, and twins Seema and Maya, have been settling into life at DESS College. The logistics - all down to husband Abdul, an IT Manager and school-run superhero.

"He's definitely earned a break," Dana laughs. "From September, we'll all be in Academic City; me at the new primary school and the girls just over the road. It'll feel a little odd at first when we all set off in the same direction!"

For eldest daughter Julie, the move to DESS College has already opened new doors. She's chosen Art as one of her GCSE subjects and is particularly drawn to Japanese styles. A planned school trip to Japan has only deepened her excitement. "It's exactly what I love about the DESS culture," Dana explains. "It's not just about academics, it's about developing the whole child."

From New Schools to New Adventures

Dana is no stranger to helping launch a new school. Her first teaching role in Dubai was at a brand-new primary school. Now she's doing it again, but with the comfort of remaining within the DESS family.

"There's something truly special about DESS," she says. "It's hard to describe, but you feel it as soon as you walk in."

It's that feeling - of belonging, of possibility, of joy, that Dana is determined to replicate at DESS Primary Academic City.

THE POWER OF PLAY: WHY SPORT BUILDS MORE THAN MUSCLE

Meet Mark Webster, Director of Sport, DESS Primary Academic City

Walk past a DESS Primary Oud Metha sports field and the chances are you'll hear more than just the bounce of a ball or the blast of a whistle. You'll hear laughter, encouragement, a rising chorus of 'well played' - and somewhere in the thick of it, you'll usually find Mark Webster.

For Mark, sport has never just been about medals or match points. "It's about resilience, teamwork, leadership," he says. "Skills that stay with you long after the final whistle."

After nearly a decade as Head of PE at DESS Primary Oud Metha, Mark now steps into the role of Director of Sport for DESS Primary Academic City; an appointment that brings with it a chance to build something special from the ground up.

From the Borders to the Big Leagues

Mark grew up in the rugby heartland of Melrose, in the Scottish Borders region, where a love for sport was part of the local DNA. He played club rugby at a high level, later donning the colours of the Dubai Hurricanes and experiencing a personal career highlight as part of the team that won the Dubai 7s in front of 40,000 spectators. That memory still sits high on his list - just below his ACL injury in 2009 that called time on his playing days.

But by then, the coaching bug had well and truly bitten.

After a gap year working in a Sydney school, Mark returned to Australia for a placement as part of his Geography degree at Aberystwyth University. He then completed his PGCE with a Sports specialism at Cambridge University's Homerton College. Teaching roles in the UK and then Dubai followed, and in 2015, he joined the DESS family.

From the Borders to the Big Leagues

Mark's philosophy is simple: sport should be for everyone. "Not every child is going to win gold, but every child should have the chance to find their moment. That might be a personal best, learning a new skill, or just turning up with a smile. If we don't make sport inclusive, we all lose."

At the new school, that ethos will continue to shape everything, from inter-school teams and daily PE lessons to an ambitious after-school programme that will include everything from Kinball and Pickleball to oversized clubs for golf taster sessions.



Culture First, Facilities Second

With expansive new sports spaces being developed, it would be easy to focus on pitches and pavilions. But as Mark is quick to point out: “The facilities are the stage, not the show. It’s the coaches and the kids who bring the energy. You can have the best facilities in the world, but they mean nothing without the right culture.”

That culture is already well underway. Across DESS, the number of children representing their school in sport continues to rise, and it’s not just about competition. “They don’t need to win every time,” Mark says. “They just need the experience of being part of a team.”



The Mental Game

Mark is also a passionate advocate for the role sport plays in mental health and wellbeing. “We often talk about sport building bodies. But just as important is how it builds confidence, friendships and emotional resilience.

“Engaging in sports also provides children with a constructive outlet for stress and a sense of belonging. It’s about building a community where every child feels valued and motivated to achieve their personal best. A great PE lesson can completely turn a child’s day around.”



Sport at Home

Mark’s commitment to sport isn’t something he leaves at the school gates. At home, it’s very much a family affair. His two sons, Freddie (Year 6, soon to join the College) and Oliver (Year 8), have represented their schools across just about every sport on offer, from rugby and water polo to padel and aquathlon. His wife, Jen, is also a self-confessed sports fanatic, currently playing what Mark calls ‘an enthusiastic amount’ of padel!

Weekends are often built around school fixtures, but when they get the chance, the Webster family can be found camping in the mountains, taking dhow trips in Oman, or exploring new corners of the world together. Back in the UK, it’s long walks and bike rides in the Cotswolds that reset the compass. “We’re a very outdoorsy family,” says Mark. “We live and breathe it.”

Looking Ahead

Opening a new school is a rare and exciting challenge, and one Mark is relishing. But ask him what matters most, and his answer comes easily.

“It’s not about the logo on the sports kit or the scoreboard at the end of the game. It’s about what the children take away from every lesson, every team talk, every match. That’s where the magic lives.”

HOUSE PROUD:

A NEW SCHOOL, A FRESH TRADITION

As you'll read elsewhere in this edition of *Pulse*, school culture doesn't just happen. It's shaped by people, traditions and the early choices that spark pride from day one.

At DESS Primary Academic City, one of those choices is already underway: selecting the names of our Houses.

These names will mean more than colours on a kit or points on a scoreboard. Each House will be a team within a team; a space to belong, contribute, and connect across year groups, classrooms and campuses.

Community, the DESS way

Like at DESS Primary Oud Metha and DESS College, our House system will bring students of all ages together to compete, collaborate and celebrate in everything from sports and academics to creative challenges and community events.

But this isn't just about following tradition. It's about shaping something new. And this time, the DESS community is helping to write the story.



What's in a name?

Families have been invited to vote from three sets of House name options, each one reflecting a unique perspective on identity and belonging:

- UAE Wildlife: Falcons, Wolves, Oryx, Vipers; bold and resilient symbols of the region's spirit.
- Natural Elements: Sunsurfers, Windrunners, Duneriders, Wavebreakers ; active, expressive, built to move.
- Emirati Landscapes: Al Wadi (Pathfinders), Al Kuthban (Shapers), Al Waha (Nurturers), Al Murtafa'at (Visionaries); names with roots, purpose and presence.

Each theme opens the door to a different kind of connection - to the environment, to each other and to the values we want our children to live by.

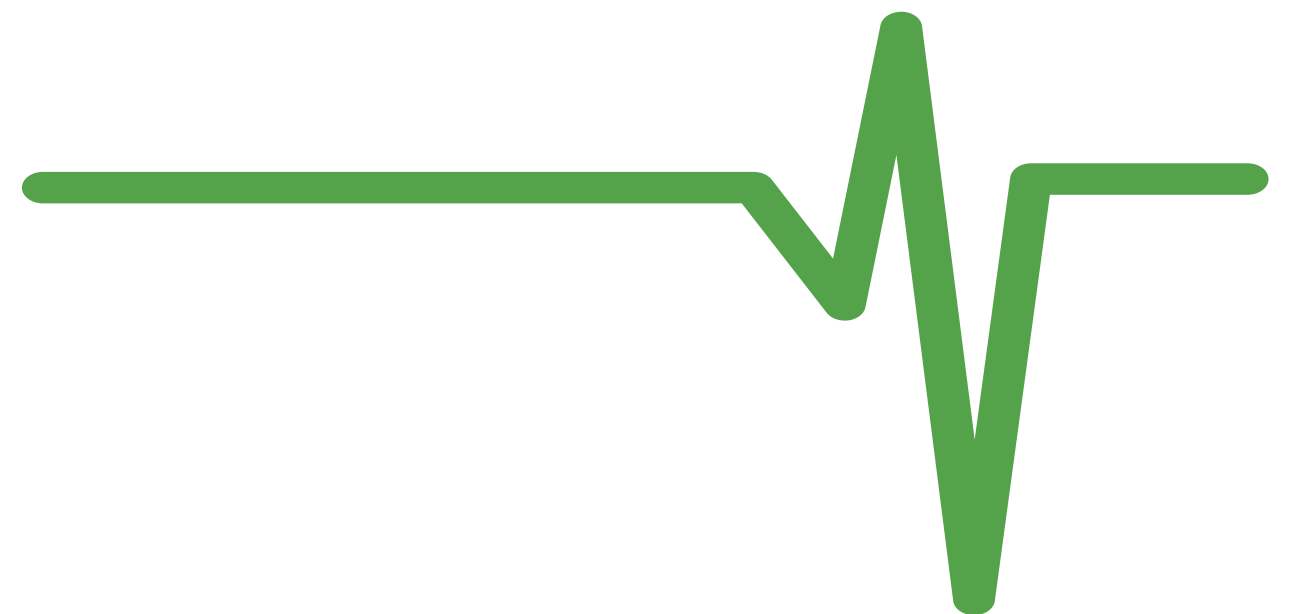
Be part of the story

This is more than a naming exercise. It's an invitation to shape a tradition that will echo in assemblies, school songs and House chants for years to come.

Because building a school takes more than buildings. It takes the kind of shared identity that only a great House system can create.

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