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Schools and Education in the UAE 2026/27

How to choose, apply and enrol, emirate by emirate

Curricula, fees, ratings, age rules, documents, learning support and university, with independent school selection help

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Schools and Education in the UAE 2026/27: How to Choose, Apply and Enrol

Last updated 1 November 2026. Next scheduled review: 1 February 2027. Written by the Relocate2UAE editorial team, an independent Abu Dhabi based relocation platform built by a family who made the move themselves. No school pays to appear on this page, and naming a school is not a recommendation.

Quick answer

Most expat children in the UAE attend private schools, which are regulated by a different authority in each emirate: KHDA in Dubai, ADEK in Abu Dhabi, SPEA in Sharjah, the RAK Department of Knowledge in Ras Al Khaimah, and the federal Ministry of Education in Ajman, Umm Al Quwain and Fujairah. Choose the curriculum first, then shortlist schools using the regulator's published ratings and approved fees, then choose where to live. Annual tuition runs from under AED 10,000 at some Indian curriculum schools to more than AED 100,000 for senior years at premium British, American and IB schools. From 2026/27 a new national age rule applies: for schools starting in August or September, a child must reach the required age by 31 December of the admission year, so Grade 1 or Year 2 is for children who are 6 by 31 December. Apply three to twelve months ahead, start document attestation early, and get your child's year group confirmed in writing.

Key facts at a glance

Question	Short answer for 2026/27
Who regulates private schools?	KHDA (Dubai), ADEK (Abu Dhabi), SPEA (Sharjah), RAKDOK (Ras Al Khaimah), and the Ministry of Education (Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Fujairah).
How many private schools are there?	Around 240 in Dubai, more than 220 in Abu Dhabi, about 135 in Sharjah and 34 in Ras Al Khaimah.
Can expat children attend government schools?	Only in limited cases. Expats pay AED 6,000 a year, must meet academic and parental employment conditions, and are capped at 20% of places. Most expat families use private schools.
What do private schools cost?	From under AED 10,000 to more than AED 100,000 a year, depending on curriculum, school and year group. Add 15% to 30% for extras.
Are Dubai fees rising in 2026/27?	No. Dubai private school fees are frozen for 2026/27. Abu Dhabi and the other emirates approve increases school by school.
What is the school starting age?	Age 6 by 31 December for Grade 1 / Year 2, 5 for KG2 / Year 1, 4 for KG1 / FS2 and 3 for Pre-KG / FS1. April-start schools use 31 March.
When does the school year run?	31 August 2026 to 2 July 2027 for most schools. Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi curriculum schools usually run April to March.
Is Arabic compulsory?	Yes, in every private school, along with Islamic Education for Muslim pupils and Moral, Social and Cultural Studies.
Can a school refuse my child because of a disability or learning need?	Not on that ground alone. Federal law and the Dubai and Abu Dhabi inclusion policies protect admission.

Question	Short answer for 2026/27
How far ahead should I apply?	Ideally 6 to 12 months for popular schools and year groups; 3 months can work with flexibility. Mid-year entry is common.
Do I need attested documents?	Usually yes for transfer certificates from many countries. The UAE does not accept apostilles, so allow 6 to 8 weeks.
Can Relocate2UAE help?	Yes. Our independent school selection and enrolment support is explained below.

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How UAE schooling works for expat families

Short answer: The UAE has government schools, mainly for Emirati families, and a large private sector that most expat children attend. Each emirate regulates its own private schools, publishes ratings and approves fees, so where you live decides which rules apply. Every private school teaches its own curriculum alongside compulsory UAE subjects such as Arabic.

Who regulates which schools

Emirate	Private school regulator	Ratings published?	Where parents check
Dubai	Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA)	Yes	web.khda.gov.ae school directory: rating, fees and reports

Emirate	Private school regulator	Ratings published?	Where parents check
Abu Dhabi (including Al Ain and Al Dhafra)	Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK)	Yes, under the Irtiqa'a programme	TAMM school finder and adek.gov.ae
Sharjah	Sharjah Private Education Authority (SPEA)	Yes, under the Itqan programme	spea.shj.ae school directory with fee filters
Ras Al Khaimah	Ras Al Khaimah Department of Knowledge (RAKDOK)	Yes	dok.rak.ae/schools
Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Fujairah	UAE Ministry of Education	Not routinely published per school	Ask the school; check external accreditations

ADEK replaced the old Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) in 2017, so older articles and school websites that mention ADEC are describing the same regulator.

Government schools: are they an option for expats?

Rarely. The UAE government portal says expatriate children can join government schools from Grade 2 to Grade 12 for AED 6,000 a year, but only if a parent works for a government, semi-government or local entity, the child scored at least 85% in Arabic, English and Maths, and places remain within a 20% cap per school and class. Teaching follows the Ministry of Education curriculum, much of it in Arabic. In practice, almost all expat families choose private schools. Abu Dhabi's charter schools, which are publicly funded and privately run, are open to Emirati and GCC families rather than expats.

What every private school must teach

Whatever its curriculum, every UAE private school must teach Arabic (as a first language for Arab pupils and as an additional language for others), Islamic Education for Muslim pupils, and Moral Education and UAE Social Studies. Kindergarten now has minimum Arabic time too. It is a meaningful part of the timetable, so ask every school how it teaches Arabic to non-Arabic speakers.

Step by step: how to choose and join a UAE school

Short answer: Decide the curriculum, set a total budget per child, shortlist three to five schools using regulator ratings and approved fees, check places in your child's year group, apply and book assessments, start attestation, then choose your home near the school.

1. **Decide the curriculum.** Base it on where your child is now, where they are likely to finish school and where they may go to university. Continuity matters more the older the child.
2. **Set a total budget per child.** Tuition plus transport, uniform, books, devices, trips, exams and activities. Check what your employer's education allowance actually covers.
3. **Pick your emirate and rough area.** Check commute distances to work and to likely schools before you look at housing.
4. **Build a shortlist of three to five schools.** Use the regulator's directory for ratings, the year of the rating and approved fees. Read the full report, not just the headline grade.
5. **Confirm availability in your child's year group.** Ask whether there is a place now, a waiting list, or a realistic date.
6. **Apply and book assessments.** Many schools assess remotely. Kindergarten admissions in Abu Dhabi cannot use entrance tests or interviews.

7. **Start document attestation.** Transfer certificates from many countries need legalisation, which takes weeks and is far easier before you leave.
8. **Accept a place in writing.** Get the year group, the approved fee schedule, the payment dates and the refund policy in writing before you pay a deposit.
9. **Choose your home.** Drive the route at 7am on a school day before signing a lease.
10. **Complete registration.** Upload Emirates ID and visa details once issued. In Dubai, a child can usually start while visa paperwork is still in progress.

Choosing a curriculum

Short answer: Choose the curriculum that keeps your child's education continuous, especially from age 11. British curriculum suits families heading back to the UK or Commonwealth, American suits US-bound families and offers flexible entry, IB suits internationally mobile families, and national curricula (Indian, French, German and others) keep a home-country pathway open.

Dubai's private schools alone offer 17 curricula, so almost every family can find a match. The question is how much choice you have in your child's year group, in your chosen area, at your budget.

Curriculum	Exit qualifications	Best suited to	Availability
British (English National Curriculum)	IGCSE / GCSE, A Level, some BTEC	Families returning to the UK, Ireland or the Commonwealth	The largest international sector in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah
American	High School Diploma, AP courses, SAT	US-bound families; students who prefer continuous assessment	Widely available in every emirate
International Baccalaureate	PYP, MYP, IB Diploma, IB Career-related Programme	Internationally mobile families; strong university recognition worldwide	Good choice in Dubai and Abu Dhabi; limited elsewhere
Indian (CBSE, ICSE, some Kerala board)	Class 10 and Class 12 board examinations	Families keeping an Indian pathway	The most affordable and one of the largest sectors
French	Brevet, Baccalaureat	French-speaking families and French university routes	Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah
German, Australian, Canadian, Filipino, Pakistani, Japanese and others	National qualifications	Families staying on a home-country track	Mainly Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah
SABIS	IGCSE, A Level or AP	Families wanting a structured, exam-focused system	Choueifat campuses across several emirates
UAE Ministry of Education	UAE secondary certificate	Arabic-speaking families	Government schools and some private schools

How to decide

- **Under 7:** curriculum matters least. Choose for the school, the teaching and the commute.
- **7 to 11:** continuity starts to matter. Switching systems is manageable with support.
- **11 to 14:** choose deliberately, because this decides the exam route.
- **14 and over:** avoid switching curriculum mid-course. In Dubai, students in Grades 9 to 12 changing curriculum need Ministry of Education approval, and every move at this age carries exam risk.

Three questions families often forget: does the school teach your curriculum all the way to the final year, what subjects are actually offered at exam level, and how many students sat the exit exams last year.

Schools by emirate

Short answer: Dubai has the widest choice, Abu Dhabi has strong, tightly regulated schools with clear fee rules, and Sharjah is the main lower-cost alternative with real curriculum choice. In the smaller northern emirates, confirm your school before you commit to the emirate.

Emirate	Private schools (approx.)	Popular family areas for schools	Our detailed guide
Dubai	About 240 (233 at the start of 2025/26 plus 7 new for 2026/27), with about 406,000 pupils	Arabian Ranches, Dubai Hills, Jumeirah, Al Barsha, Mirdif, Dubai Sports City, The Springs and Meadows, Jumeirah Village Circle	Dubai International Schools Guide
Abu Dhabi	More than 220, plus 233 nurseries	Saadiyat Island, Al Reem Island, Khalifa City, Al Raha, Yas Island, Mohammed Bin Zayed City, Al Reef; Al Ain	Abu Dhabi International Schools Guide
Sharjah	About 135, with more than 204,000 pupils	Muwailih and University City, Aljada, Al Rahmaniya, Al Taawun and Al Khan	Schools in the Rest of the UAE
Ras Al Khaimah	34	Al Hamra Village, Khuzam, Al Dhait	Schools in the Rest of the UAE
Ajman	About 45 to 50	Al Tallah, Al Jurf, Al Hamidiya	Schools in the Rest of the UAE
Umm Al Quwain and Fujairah	A small number each	Fujairah City, Sakamkam, Al Faseel, Dibba; Al Salamah in UAQ	Schools in the Rest of the UAE

Dubai

Dubai has the largest and most competitive private school market in the country, with 17 curricula and fees ranging from budget to premium. Fees are frozen for 2026/27, KHDA has resumed inspections, and seven new schools opened this year, including Harrow International School Dubai, Queen Elizabeth's School in Dubai Sports City and Rugby School Dubai. Popular year groups at the best-known schools still have waiting lists, so apply early. For named schools, ratings and fees by area, see our Dubai International Schools Guide and the Dubai Area Guide.

Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi has more than 220 private schools, a detailed rulebook protecting parents on fees, admissions and inclusion, and published Irtiqa'a ratings. In ADEK's latest published results, 77% of the 204 rated schools were Good or better, including 13 Outstanding. Schools must display their latest rating on a plaque at the entrance. For named schools by area, see our Abu Dhabi International Schools Guide and the Abu Dhabi Area Guide.

Sharjah and the northern emirates

Sharjah offers broad curriculum choice at lower fees and rents, with published Itqan reports and fee increases tied to ratings, but a heavy peak-hour commute into Dubai. Ras Al Khaimah publishes independent inspection reports and has clear fee and refund rules. In Ajman, Umm Al Quwain and Fujairah, ratings are not routinely published, so you check accreditations and visit. Our Schools in the Rest of the UAE guide names schools, fees and ratings emirate by emirate.

School fees in the UAE for 2026/27

Short answer: Annual tuition ranges from under AED 10,000 at some Indian and Pakistani curriculum schools to more than AED 100,000 for senior years at premium international schools. Most British, American and IB schools sit between about AED 30,000 and AED 90,000. Dubai fees are frozen for 2026/27. Budget 15% to 30% on top of tuition for transport, uniform, books, trips, exams and activities.

Typical annual tuition bands

Band	Typical annual tuition (AED)	What you usually get	Where to look
Value	Under 20,000	Mostly Indian, Pakistani and Filipino curricula; larger classes, fewer facilities	Sharjah, Ajman, Dubai (Al Qusais, Muhaisnah), Abu Dhabi (Mussafah, Mohammed Bin Zayed City)
Mid-market	20,000 to 50,000	Many British, American and Indian schools; solid facilities	Every emirate
Upper mid-market	50,000 to 80,000	Established British, American and IB schools with strong facilities	Dubai, Abu Dhabi, a few in Sharjah
Premium	80,000 to 120,000+	Top-tier British, American and IB schools; extensive facilities; senior years at the top of the range	Dubai and Abu Dhabi

These bands are planning ranges drawn from regulator-approved fee schedules. Fees usually rise with age: secondary and sixth form years often cost considerably more than early years at the same school, so price the year group your child will be in two or three years from now, not just this year. Always download the school's current approved schedule from the regulator's directory before you compare.

What else to budget for

Extras below are indicative ranges; your school's published fee schedule is the figure to budget for.

Cost	Typical range	Notes
Application fee	Up to AED 500 in Dubai and RAK	Abu Dhabi does not allow application fees or deposits before enrolment is confirmed
Registration or re-registration deposit	Dubai: up to 10% for new places, 5% or AED 500 (whichever is lower) to re-register; Abu Dhabi: up to 5%	Deducted from tuition, not charged on top
School bus	About AED 3,000 to 8,500 a year	Depends on distance and operator
Uniform and PE kit	About AED 1,000 to 3,000 a year	Abu Dhabi schools must waive fees when you use compliant second-hand items

Cost	Typical range	Notes
Books, stationery and devices	About AED 1,000 to 4,000 a year	Some schools require a specific laptop or tablet
Trips, activities and clubs	About AED 500 to 2,000 a term	Residential trips at secondary level cost more
Exam fees	Several thousand AED at IGCSE, A Level, AP and IB	Usually charged separately
Learning support	Varies	See special educational needs for what schools can charge

How fees are controlled in each emirate

Emirate	2026/27 position	Key parent protections
Dubai	Fee freeze: no increases for 2026/27	Application fee max AED 500; re-registration deposit cannot be collected before 1 May for September-start schools; withdraw within 10 days of any announced increase for a full refund
Abu Dhabi	No blanket freeze; increases only with ADEK approval, linked to the Education Cost Index, the school's Irtiqa'a rating and its improvement plan	At least three instalments (up to ten); 5% registration cap; published, ADEK-stamped fee schedules; set refund scale if you withdraw
Sharjah	Increases linked to the school's Itqan rating, approved by SPEA	Approved fee files on each school's SPEA profile
Ras Al Khaimah	RAKDOK Tuition Fees Policy	Application fee max AED 500; deposit max 5%; three terms or ten monthly instalments; defined refunds
Ajman, UAQ, Fujairah	Ministry of Education approves changes	Ask for the Ministry-approved schedule in writing

What happens if you withdraw?

The rules are set by each regulator. In Dubai, once the year starts, a school can keep one month's fees if your child attended up to two weeks, two months' fees for up to a month, and the full term after that. In Abu Dhabi, the scale runs from the 5% registration fee in the first week to a full term after six weeks, and unused transport fees are refunded. Read your school's refund policy before you pay.

Education allowances

If your employer pays a school allowance, check whether it is a fixed sum or covers actual fees, how many children it covers, whether it includes registration, transport and exam fees, and whether it rises with year group. Our UAE Salary Guide shows what typical packages include, and our UAE Cost of Living Guide puts school costs into a full household budget.

School ratings and inspections explained

Short answer: Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah rate schools on the same six-point scale: Outstanding, Very Good, Good, Acceptable, Weak and Very Weak. Good is the expected standard. Always check the year of the rating and read the full report, because ratings can be several years old.

Rating	What it means
Outstanding	Performance substantially exceeds UAE expectations
Very Good	Performance exceeds UAE expectations
Good	Performance meets UAE expectations; the expected level
Acceptable	Meets the minimum level of quality
Weak	Below expectations
Very Weak	Significantly below expectations

What inspectors look at

Inspections under the UAE School Inspection Framework cover students' achievement and progress, personal and social development (including Islamic values and Emirati culture), teaching and assessment, curriculum, the protection, care and support of students, and leadership and management. Inclusion of students of determination is assessed throughout.

Where each emirate stands in 2026/27

- **Dubai:** KHDA paused full inspections in 2024/25 and 2025/26, so most current Dubai ratings date from 2023/24. Inspections resumed in 2026/27 with a two-tier model: a full inspection that sets a new rating, or a shorter monitoring visit that keeps the existing rating. Both come at very short notice. Future fee increases will be linked to the outcome.
- **Abu Dhabi:** ADEK's Irtiqa'a programme inspects schools on a cycle. The latest published results covered 204 schools: 13 Outstanding, 51 Very Good, 93 Good, 42 Acceptable and 5 Weak. Ratings are shown on a plaque at each school entrance and in the TAMM school finder.
- **Sharjah:** SPEA's Itqan programme rated 127 schools in its latest cycle: 1 Outstanding, 19 Very Good, 77 Good and 30 Acceptable.
- **Ras Al Khaimah:** independent evaluations in 2026 on the national framework, with full reports on the RAKDOK website.
- **Ajman, Umm Al Quwain and Fujairah:** the Ministry of Education inspects but does not routinely publish school-by-school reports.

How to use ratings well

- **Check the year.** A rating from 2023/24 may describe a school before a change of principal.
- **Read the phase judgements.** A school rated Good overall can be Very Good in primary and Acceptable in secondary. Look at the phase your child will join.
- **Look for direction of travel.** Consistent improvement over several inspections often tells you more than a single grade.
- **Remember what ratings do not measure.** Class sizes, teacher turnover, the commute and how happy your child will be all matter. Visit on a normal teaching day and speak to current parents.

- **Check external accreditations,** especially where UAE ratings are not published: British Schools Overseas, Council of International Schools, Cognia, IB World School authorisation and CBSE affiliation can all be verified online.

Age rules and year group placement

Short answer: For new admissions from 2026/27, schools starting in August or September use 31 December of the admission year as the age cut-off, replacing 31 August. April-start schools use 31 March. Children already enrolled are not affected. Children moving from abroad are placed by their last completed grade, so get the year group confirmed in writing.

Stage	British equivalent	Age by 31 December of the admission year
Pre-KG	FS1	3
KG1	FS2	4
KG2	Year 1	5
Grade 1	Year 2	6

What this means in practice

- **The change is national.** The Ministry of Education announced it in December 2025 for all schools and kindergartens starting in August or September.
- **Readiness assessments for autumn birthdays.** For 2026/27, children born between September and December may be placed in either of two year groups depending on a readiness assessment. Ask the school how it applies this.
- **British year groups can feel "a year ahead".** A child in Year 2 in England may be placed in Year 3 or Grade 2 here, or the reverse, depending on birthday and curriculum. Do not assume.
- **Meeting the age rule does not guarantee a place.** Placement still depends on availability.
- **Transfers from abroad** are placed by the last grade successfully completed, under Ministry of Education equivalency rules.

Admissions timeline: when to apply

Short answer: Start researching 9 to 12 months before your move and apply 6 to 12 months ahead for popular schools, particularly for September entry. Many schools accept applications year-round, and mid-year entry is common in the UAE, so a late move is not a lost cause. Availability, not willingness, is the constraint.

Older guides describe a single January to March application window. That is no longer accurate: popular schools often open the next year's applications in the autumn, and many admit continuously while places last.

When	What to do
9 to 12 months before	Decide curriculum, budget and emirate; shortlist schools; check age placement; ask about waiting lists
6 to 9 months before	Submit applications to three to five schools; pay application fees where charged; request documents and start attestation

When	What to do
3 to 6 months before	Complete assessments (often online); receive offers; confirm year group and fees in writing; pay the registration deposit for your chosen school
1 to 3 months before	Finalise housing near the school; arrange transport; order uniform; complete registration forms
On arrival	Upload Emirates ID and visa details; attend orientation; meet the class teacher
Arriving mid-year	Contact admissions directly; widen your area and fee band; ask about pro-rated fees and realistic start dates

Tips that make the difference

- **Apply to three to five schools,** including at least one with places available now.
- **Join waiting lists anyway.** Places open as families leave the UAE, especially over the summer.
- **Ask the right question.** Not "is there space?" but "how many children are ahead of us on the list for this year group?"
- **Siblings:** priority rules are set by each school, so ask whether a sibling's place helps.

Documents and attestation

Short answer: Expect to provide passports, visas and Emirates IDs, a birth certificate, recent school reports, a transfer certificate from Grade 2 / Year 3 upward, vaccination records and photographs. Transfer certificates from many countries must be attested in the issuing country, then by the UAE embassy there, then by the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The UAE does not accept apostilles.

The standard document set

- Child's passport copy, plus UAE residence visa and Emirates ID (or proof the application is in progress)
- Both parents' passport, visa and Emirates ID copies
- Birth certificate, attested if the school asks
- School reports for the last one to two years
- Transfer certificate (TC) or leaving letter from the previous school, for Grade 2 / Year 3 and above
- Vaccination and immunisation record
- Passport photographs
- Any educational psychology, medical or learning support reports, and any previous individual education plan
- Legal translation into Arabic or English for any document in another language

Do I need my transfer certificate attested?

It depends on where it was issued. KHDA's published guideline for Dubai sets out three groups, and schools in other emirates apply similar rules:

Previous school located in	What the transfer certificate needs
UK, Ireland, Western Europe, USA, Canada, Australia	Principal's signature and school stamp; no further attestation

Previous school located in	What the transfer certificate needs
Another UAE emirate or a GCC country	Attestation by that emirate's or country's education authority
Elsewhere, including Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Russia, Latin America and New Zealand	Attestation by the home country's education ministry, then the UAE embassy there, then the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Requirements can change and vary by school, so confirm with your chosen school before you leave. Once in the UAE, MOFA attestation of a foreign document costs AED 150 per document through the MOFA app with UAE Pass, plus courier fees. Our Before You Arrive checklist covers attestation of other family documents.

Equivalency certificates

The Ministry of Education's equivalency service mainly applies to secondary certificates (Grades 10 to 12) and final school diplomas from non-Ministry curricula, for example when a student needs a UAE-recognised Grade 12 certificate for university. Most younger children joining a private school need a transfer certificate rather than an equivalency certificate. Applications are online with UAE Pass.

Emirates ID and visas

Your child needs a residence visa sponsored by a parent. In Dubai, a child can register on a passport and proof that the visa is in progress, with the Emirates ID uploaded later. Our UAE Visa Requirements Guide explains family sponsorship. Where a visa question affects enrolment, an immigration specialist such as our partner Davidson & Co. would be worth speaking to.

Special educational needs and inclusion

Short answer: UAE law says a disability must not prevent admission to any government or private school. Dubai and Abu Dhabi go further: schools cannot refuse a child on the basis of special educational needs alone, and extra fees for support are tightly limited. Provision still varies widely, so share full reports early and confirm the support and its cost in writing.

In the UAE, people with disabilities are called people of determination, and you will see this term in school and government documents.

Your rights in each emirate

Emirate	Admission	Extra fees for support
Dubai (KHDA)	Schools must not refuse admission on SEND grounds; any exceptional non-admission must be reported to KHDA	Standard support is covered by tuition; extra charges, for example for an individual learning support assistant, only through an individual service agreement registered with KHDA, at no more than actual cost
Abu Dhabi (ADEK)	A student cannot be refused on the basis of needs if there is space; a school that says it cannot accommodate must notify ADEK and parents within 7 days, and ADEK can overturn it	Extra charges only for specialist provision beyond the standard, backed by a clinical report, agreed annually and itemised; total extra charges capped at 50% of tuition
Other emirates	Federal Law No. 29 of 2006 (as amended) protects admission	Ask each school and confirm in writing

The types of support you will find

- Learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia
- ADHD and attention support
- Autism spectrum support, including small-group provision in some schools
- Speech and language, and occupational therapy, either in school or through external therapists working on site
- Hearing, visual and physical needs, and assistive technology
- English as an Additional Language (EAL) support
- Gifted and talented programmes

Dubai also has specialist settings for children with more complex needs. Capacity is limited and waiting lists are common, so contact them as early as possible.

How the process works

1. **Share full reports at application.** Medical, psychological and educational assessments, plus any previous individual education plan.
2. **School assessment.** The school's inclusion team assesses your child's needs.
3. **Support plan.** An individual education plan (IEP) sets goals, accommodations and who provides what.
4. **Agree costs.** Any extra charge should be itemised and agreed in writing before your child starts.

Ask every school

- Who leads inclusion, and which specialists are on staff?
- Have you supported a child with my child's profile recently?
- What is included in tuition, and what would be charged extra?
- Can external therapists work with my child on site?
- What exam access arrangements can you provide?

Softening a diagnosis to secure a place almost always backfires: a school that does not understand a child's needs cannot resource them. For health insurance cover of therapies and assessments, see our UAE Healthcare and Health Insurance Guide.

Nurseries and early years

Short answer: Children under about 4 attend licensed nurseries, which are separate from schools, while FS1 / Pre-KG classes inside schools take children from age 3. Nurseries are licensed by KHDA in Dubai and ADEK in Abu Dhabi. Fees vary widely, so check what is included and whether the nursery feeds into the schools you are considering.

- **Abu Dhabi:** 233 ADEK-licensed nurseries take children from birth to under 4. They cannot refuse a child on nationality, ability or religion, and any fee increase needs ADEK approval. Free Al Ghad public nurseries are for Emirati families.
- **Dubai:** more than 330 KHDA-regulated early childhood centres, with 17 more opening in 2026/27.
- **School FS1 / Pre-KG:** a school's age-3 class is regulated as part of the school, often with priority into FS2 / KG1.

For named Abu Dhabi options and fees, see our Nurseries in Abu Dhabi guide. Our partner Little Land Nursery is one of the early years settings families ask us about. For weekend and after-school ideas, see Things to Do With Kids in the UAE.

The 2026/27 school calendar and school day

Short answer: Most UAE schools follow the Ministry of Education's unified calendar: term started on 31 August 2026, winter break runs from 14 December 2026 to 3 January 2027, spring break from 5 to 9 April 2027, and the last day is 2 July 2027. Sharjah private schools follow SPEA's calendar, and Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi curriculum schools usually run April to March.

Milestone	Date (Ministry of Education calendar)
Schools open	Monday 31 August 2026
Mid-term break	12 to 16 October 2026
Winter break	14 December 2026 to 3 January 2027 (classes resume 4 January)
Spring break	5 to 9 April 2027
Last day for students	2 July 2027

The Ministry has also published the next two years: 2027/28 runs from 30 August 2027 to 30 June 2028, and 2028/29 from 28 August 2028 to 29 June 2029. Some non-Ministry curriculum schools add a February or March half-term. Your school's own approved calendar is the one that counts. Our UAE School Holiday Calendar 2026/27 sets out term dates and public holidays in full.

The school week and typical hours

	Typical times
School week	Monday to Friday, with a Saturday and Sunday weekend; Sharjah schools work a Monday to Thursday week
Start	About 7:30 to 8:00am
Finish, primary	About 2:30 to 3:15pm
Finish, secondary	About 3:00 to 3:45pm
Friday	Short day. Dubai private schools must finish by 11:30am on Fridays, and many schools elsewhere also finish late morning
After-school activities	Usually 3:30 to 5:00pm, some free and some charged

Parent communication

Most schools use an app or platform such as Seesaw, ClassDojo or their own system for updates, homework and messages, and hold two or three parent-teacher meetings a year. Parent volunteering on reading programmes, trips and events is a good way to settle into the community. Abu Dhabi schools also follow ADEK's attendance rules, under which absence above 5% of the year is a cause for concern and term-time family holidays count as unexcused.

School transport and daily logistics

Short answer: Most schools offer air-conditioned buses with trained supervisors, typically costing about AED 3,000 to 8,500 a year. Buses are regulated by the RTA in Dubai and by ADEK and the Integrated Transport Centre in Abu Dhabi. Confirm the route reaches your community and how long your child will be on board before you choose a home.

Option	What to know
School bus	The most common choice; GPS tracking and a supervisor on board; Abu Dhabi rules cap journeys at 75 minutes and require CCTV
Private car drop-off	Flexible, but peak traffic runs roughly 7:00 to 8:30am and 2:00 to 4:00pm; most schools have drop-off zones
Car pools	Common in villa communities and organised through parent WhatsApp groups
School ride services	In Dubai for 2026/27: Careem School Rides, Uber Teens and BOLT School; check age rules and safety settings
Public transport	Older students in Dubai get 50% off with a student nol card

Questions to ask about the bus: Does the route reach my community, not just my area? What are the real pick-up and drop-off times? Is there a sibling discount? How long is the longest journey on the route?

Our UAE Public Transport Guide and UAE Driving and Vehicle Guide cover getting around more generally.

University and higher education in the UAE

Short answer: The UAE has national universities, international branch campuses and private universities. Programmes outside free zones are accredited by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), while Dubai free zone universities are licensed by KHDA. Expat students can stay on a parent's sponsorship: sons up to 25 (or beyond while studying) and unmarried daughters with no age limit.

Your options

- **UAE universities:** in the QS World University Rankings 2027, Khalifa University placed 147th, UAE University 217th, American University of Sharjah 258th and University of Sharjah 283rd.
- **Branch campuses:** Dubai hosts dozens of international branch campuses, mainly in Dubai International Academic City and Dubai Knowledge Park, with two more opening in 2026/27, including the American University of Beirut's Dubai campus. Abu Dhabi hosts NYU Abu Dhabi and Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi.
- **Studying abroad:** many students take British, American, Australian, Canadian or European routes after IB, A Level or AP. Plan exam choices around the entry requirements of the countries you are targeting.

Accreditation: check before you enrol

Degrees from CAA-accredited programmes are recognised federally. Degrees from KHDA-licensed free zone campuses are widely accepted, but some federal government jobs and regulated professions require federal recognition, so check if your child is aiming for one.

Visas and the Golden Visa for students

A resident parent can sponsor a son up to age 25, and beyond 25 if he is enrolled in a course of at least one year, and an unmarried daughter with no age limit. Universities can also sponsor student visas. Outstanding students may qualify for a Golden Visa: the published criteria include 95% or above in Grade 12 for school leavers, and high university grade point averages for graduates. Durations and thresholds differ between official sources, so confirm with ICP or GDRFA before you apply. Our UAE Visa Requirements Guide covers family and Golden Visa routes.

What has changed for 2026/27

1. **New age cut-off:** 31 December, not 31 August, for new admissions to schools starting in August or September.
2. **Dubai fee freeze:** no fee increases at Dubai private schools for 2026/27.
3. **Dubai inspections are back:** after a two-year pause, KHDA returned to inspections with short-notice full inspections and monitoring visits.
4. **Unified three-year calendar:** the Ministry of Education published school dates for 2026/27 to 2028/29 for public and private schools, with a shorter winter break this year.
5. **Shorter Fridays:** Dubai private schools must finish by 11:30am on Fridays, since January 2026.
6. **Abu Dhabi fee and admission rules in force:** ADEK's Fees Policy (three to ten instalments, 5% registration cap, second-hand uniform waivers) and its admissions and inclusion policies now apply in full.
7. **More Arabic in kindergarten:** minimum daily Arabic time in private kindergartens, rising by 2027/28.
8. **Artificial intelligence in the curriculum:** AI became a subject in public schools in 2025/26, and the Cabinet has approved an AI curriculum for all schools.
9. **New schools:** seven new schools in Dubai (about 17,000 seats) and six in Sharjah opened for 2026/27.

Questions to ask every school

Curriculum and outcomes

- Which curriculum do you follow, and to which year group?
- What subjects are offered at exam level, and how many students sat exit exams last year?
- Where do your graduates go to university?

Quality

- What is your latest inspection rating, and from which year?
- May I see the full report, including the phase judgements?
- What is your teacher turnover, and how long has the principal been in post?

Places and admissions

- Is there a place in my child's year group now, or how many children are ahead of us on the waiting list?
- What assessment is needed, and can it be done remotely?
- Which year group will you place my child in? Please confirm in writing.

Cost

- May I have the current regulator-approved fee schedule?
- What other costs apply across a full year?
- What are your payment dates and refund policy?

Wellbeing and support

- How do you teach Arabic to non-Arabic speakers?
- How do you support children new to the UAE?
- What learning support is included, and what costs extra?

Checklist before you accept a place

- Curriculum chosen, and continuity to the final year confirmed
- Year group checked against the 31 December cut-off and confirmed in writing
- Latest inspection report read, including its year and phase judgements
- Approved fee schedule received, and the total annual cost per child calculated
- Payment dates, deposit rules and refund policy received in writing
- Employer education allowance checked against the real total
- Place confirmed, or waiting-list position known
- Transfer certificate requested and attestation started where needed
- Birth certificate, reports, vaccination records and photos ready
- Learning support needs shared, agreed and costed in writing
- Bus route to your community confirmed, with real journey time
- School run driven at 7am on a weekday before signing a lease
- School calendar checked against both parents' work and any siblings' schools
- Visited on a normal teaching day and spoken to current parents

How Relocate2UAE can help with school selection

Short answer: Our independent education consultation costs AED 799 and gives you a personalised school shortlist based on your child's needs, curriculum, budget and location, plus a document checklist and timeline. No school pays us to recommend it.

What the consultation includes

- **School selection:** personalised recommendations based on your child's needs, budget and preferred areas, with a curriculum comparison and an explanation of each school's rating
- **Enrolment support:** an application timeline, a document and attestation checklist, and help preparing applications and assessments
- **Visit coordination:** help arranging school visits and assessments, in person or online
- **Specialist connections:** introductions to educational psychologists, assessment centres and learning support specialists where needed
- **University planning:** guidance on UAE universities, international routes, accreditation and scholarships

Why families use us

- **Independent:** no school pays to appear in our recommendations
- **Experience-backed:** built by a family who relocated to Abu Dhabi with children
- **Joined up:** school choice connected to housing, visas, budget and commute

Request a callback or message us on WhatsApp to get started.

Frequently asked questions

How do I choose a school in the UAE?

Decide the curriculum first, set a total budget per child, then shortlist three to five schools using your emirate's regulator directory, which shows ratings, the year of the rating and approved fees. Check availability in your child's year group, read the full inspection reports, visit on a normal school day, and choose your home near the school.

When should I apply for schools in the UAE?

Ideally 6 to 12 months before your move for popular schools and September entry. Many schools accept applications year-round and mid-year entry is common, so a move at short notice can still work if you are flexible on area or school.

How much are international school fees in the UAE?

From under AED 10,000 a year at some Indian curriculum schools to more than AED 100,000 for senior years at premium schools. Most British, American and IB schools charge between about AED 30,000 and AED 90,000. Add 15% to 30% for transport, uniform, books, trips and exams.

Are school fees going up in Dubai in 2026/27?

No. Dubai private school fees are frozen for the 2026/27 academic year. Future increases are expected to be linked to the ratings from KHDA's resumed inspections.

Are school fees going up in Abu Dhabi?

There is no blanket freeze in Abu Dhabi. Schools can only raise fees with ADEK approval, linked to the Education Cost Index, the school's Irtiqa'a rating and its improvement plan. Check the ADEK-stamped fee schedule on the school's website.

What is the school starting age in the UAE?

For schools starting in August or September, a child must be 6 by 31 December of the admission year to enter Grade 1 or Year 2, 5 for KG2 or Year 1, 4 for KG1 or FS2, and 3 for Pre-KG or FS1. This applies to new admissions from 2026/27. April-start schools use 31 March.

Which curriculum is best for my child?

The one that keeps their education continuous. British curriculum suits families returning to the UK or Ireland, American suits US-bound families, IB suits internationally mobile families, and national curricula keep a home-country pathway open. Avoid switching curriculum after age 14 if you can.

Can expat children go to government schools in the UAE?

Only in limited cases. Expatriate children can join government schools from Grade 2 for AED 6,000 a year if a parent works for a government, semi-government or local entity and the child scored at least 85% in Arabic, English and Maths, within a 20% cap. Most expat families choose private schools.

What documents do I need to enrol my child in a UAE school?

Usually passport, visa and Emirates ID copies for the child and parents, a birth certificate, the last one to two years of school reports, a transfer certificate from Grade 2 or Year 3 upward, vaccination records and photographs. Documents not in Arabic or English need a legal translation.

Do I need to attest my child's transfer certificate?

It depends on the country. Transfer certificates from the UK, Ireland, Western Europe, the USA, Canada and Australia usually need only the principal's signature and school stamp. Certificates from many other countries need attestation by the home education ministry, the UAE embassy and the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The UAE does not accept apostilles.

How do UAE school ratings work?

Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah rate schools on a six-point scale from Outstanding to Very Weak, where Good is the expected standard. Ratings are published by KHDA, ADEK, SPEA and RAKDOK. Always check the year of the rating and read the full report.

Are Dubai school ratings up to date?

Most Dubai ratings date from 2023/24, because KHDA paused full inspections in 2024/25 and 2025/26. Inspections resumed in 2026/27, so new ratings will follow during the year.

Can a UAE school refuse my child because of special educational needs?

Not on that ground alone. Federal law says a disability must not prevent admission, Dubai schools must report any exceptional non-admission to KHDA, and Abu Dhabi schools must notify ADEK, which can overturn the decision. Provision varies, so confirm support and costs in writing.

Do schools charge extra for learning support?

Standard support should be covered by tuition. In Dubai, extra charges such as an individual learning support assistant are allowed only through a service agreement registered with KHDA, at actual cost. In Abu Dhabi, extra charges need a clinical justification and are capped at 50% of tuition.

Is Arabic compulsory in UAE private schools?

Yes. Every private school must teach Arabic, along with Islamic Education for Muslim pupils and Moral Education and UAE Social Studies, whatever its curriculum.

When is the UAE school year in 2026/27?

Most schools run from 31 August 2026 to 2 July 2027, with a mid-term break from 12 to 16 October, winter break from 14 December to 3 January and spring break from 5 to 9 April. Sharjah private schools and Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi curriculum schools have their own calendars.

Can my child start school mid-year?

Yes. Mid-year entry is common in the UAE because families arrive throughout the year. Ask about pro-rated fees and how the school supports new arrivals.

What happens to fees if we withdraw from a school?

Each regulator sets a refund scale. In Dubai, once the year starts, a school can keep one month's fees for up to two weeks' attendance, two months' fees for up to a month, and the full term after that. In Abu Dhabi, the scale runs from the registration fee in the first week to a full term after six weeks.

How much does a school bus cost in the UAE?

Typically about AED 3,000 to 8,500 a year, depending on distance and operator. Confirm the route reaches your community and ask how long the longest journey is.

Is homeschooling allowed for expat children in the UAE?

There is no clear official homeschooling route for expat children, and federal law makes education compulsory for non-citizens to the end of the primary stage. Speak to your emirate's regulator before relying on homeschooling.

Can my child stay on my visa while at university?

Yes. A resident parent can sponsor a son up to age 25, and beyond if he is enrolled in a course of at least one year, and an unmarried daughter with no age limit. Universities can also sponsor student visas.

How can an education consultant help?

An independent consultant saves time by matching your child's needs, curriculum, budget and location to a realistic shortlist, explaining ratings and fees, and managing applications and documents. Relocate2UAE's consultation costs AED 799 and no school pays us to be recommended.

Related guides

- Dubai International Schools Guide: named schools, KHDA ratings and fees by area
- Abu Dhabi International Schools Guide: ADEK ratings and the best areas for families
- Schools in the Rest of the UAE: Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain and Fujairah
- UAE School Holiday Calendar 2026/27: term dates and public holidays
- Nurseries in Abu Dhabi: early years options and fees
- Moving to Dubai With a Family: budgets, areas and settling in
- Things to Do With Kids in the UAE: activities across the emirates
- UAE Visa Requirements 2026: family visas and Emirates ID
- UAE Cost of Living Guide 2026: full household budgets
- UAE Salary Guide: education allowances in typical packages
- Before You Arrive UAE Checklist: documents to prepare before you fly
- UAE Emirates Comparison Guide: which emirate suits your family

How we researched this guide

We checked every rule against official sources first: KHDA, ADEK and its published policies, the UAE Ministry of Education, the Sharjah Private Education Authority, the Ras Al Khaimah Department of Knowledge, the UAE Government portal u.ae, the Dubai Media Office and the Abu Dhabi Media Office. Where an official page could not be accessed, we used reputable UAE media reporting of the official announcement and say so in our records. Fee bands come from regulator-approved fee schedules and are planning ranges, not price lists. Where official sources were silent or contradicted each other, as with Golden Visa durations for students, we have said so rather than guess. Rules, fees and ratings change, sometimes at short notice: treat the date at the top of this guide as its expiry warning.

Where to check for yourself

- **KHDA (Dubai):** web.khda.gov.ae: school directory, ratings, approved fees and calendars
- **ADEK (Abu Dhabi):** adek.gov.ae policies and the TAMM school finder
- **SPEA (Sharjah):** spea.shj.ae
- **RAKDOK (Ras Al Khaimah):** dok.rak.ae/schools
- **Ministry of Education:** moe.gov.ae: calendar, age rules and equivalency
- **UAE Government portal:** u.ae: school education, fees and government school admission

Disclaimer

This guide is general information for families relocating to the UAE. It is not educational, legal, financial or immigration advice. School fees, availability, curricula, inspection ratings, admission rules, age cut-offs and calendars change, sometimes without public announcement, so always confirm the current position with the school and the relevant regulator (KHDA, ADEK, SPEA, RAKDOK or the Ministry of Education) before making enrolment, housing or relocation decisions. Where official or school information differs from this guide, the official or school source prevails. Naming a school is not a recommendation, endorsement or ranking. Where a visa or residency question affects your child's enrolment, an immigration specialist such as our partner Davidson & Co. would be worth speaking to. Relocate2UAE accepts no liability for any loss arising from reliance on this guide.