

Back Together Accelerated Learning in Resettled Classrooms

Minimum expectations for principals and teachers



At a Glance

This brief sets out the minimum expectations for Dubai private schools as students return to settled classroom learning. It is grounded in international research and applies across the sector.

The Core Position

Accelerate, don't remediate.

Teach at grade level and address gaps in prior knowledge just in time.

How to Use This Brief

Principles should read it first and are expected to share it with their teachers.

Introduction

Periods of distance or remote learning, when imposed on schools by circumstances outside their control, can have effects on students that do not disappear the moment classrooms reopen. This brief sets out KHDA's expectations for how every Dubai private school should manage the resumption of settled classroom learning following any such period of disruption.

These expectations draw on extensive international research on how schools are affected by interruptions to in-person learning and on the practices that have proven most effective at accelerating learning once students return to the classroom.

The moves set out in this brief are to be understood as a minimum set of KHDA expectations for all Dubai private schools whenever students return to settled classroom learning after a period of distance or remote provision. They clarify the baseline practices schools are expected to implement under the existing expectations of the Dubai Schools Inspection Framework, with particular attention to our most vulnerable learners - those typically least well served by unanticipated periods of distance learning: students of determination, children in the early years and lower primary, and students new to English.

For the avoidance of doubt, this brief does not represent KHDA's finding that systemic or widespread learning loss has occurred across Dubai private schools, nor is it linked to any particular period of disruption, of any length. Rather, it sets out the minimum professional expectations that evidence consistently shows every school should meet whenever in-person learning has been interrupted. These expectations are aligned with existing regulatory requirements and inspection expectations.

Principals are expected to share this brief with their teachers and to translate it into practice in their school. Teachers should apply these moves across their classrooms.

What the research tells us – a simple summary

After long periods of disrupted learning, the research points to a predictable pattern and learning gaps that tend to appear in the same places. The evidence is clear enough that schools should actively monitor these as risks, rather than wait for them to become visible in whole-school data.

A note on the evidence base

The research informing this brief draws on disrupted-learning studies of various kinds - pandemic-era school closures, natural-disaster and displacement contexts, and the long-running summer learning loss literature - alongside a much wider, longer-running gap-closing evidence base that long predates any specific disruption.

That wider base covers the effects of tracking and grouping, decades of meta-analytic syntheses of effect sizes in classroom practice, and pre-pandemic studies of student opportunity and access to grade-level work. The pandemic-era studies are the most empirically clean recent demonstration of patterns the wider evidence base has documented for decades - they are not the source of the position taken here. Locally, KHDA's own work on the Dubai private-school sector during recent periods of disruption provides directly relevant evidence on what worked.

Foundations

Children who were at key developmental points during the disruption are the most affected in developing their early reading skills, number facts, and writing stamina.

Mathematics more than reading

Across every major study, mathematics was hit harder. Whereas reading often continued at home through books, mathematics often did not.

Secondary more than primary

Older students lost more measured ground and have been slower to recover.

The youngest children

Those who were in early years or early primary during the disruption lost ground not on tests but on development - talk, self-regulation, fine motor skills, early literacy and number sense. These gaps are shown to be recoverable, but only with deliberate adult-led attention.

Students of determination

Students of determination – particularly those with moderately high needs show larger initial losses than peers, and slower recovery trajectories. Interrupted routines, harder transitions, and thinner access to sustained adult attention account for much of this.

Wider equity gaps

Students new to English and those living in more challenging home circumstances lost more and have been slower to catch up.

KHDA's internal recovery analyses during and after the COVID-era disruption indicated differential recovery patterns between groups, including evidence that boys recovered more slowly than girls and that students learning remotely recovered more slowly than peers attending in person. The minimum expectations below are to be applied with these patterns in mind: schools are expected to disaggregate their own evidence and act on it.

Non-academic gaps

Attendance, concentration, independent work habits, and sense of belonging matter at least as much as the academic attainment gaps.

The research is also clear about a trap schools often fall into. Schools that respond to an extended period of unanticipated distance learning by re-teaching prior-year or earlier-in-the-year content across whole classes as a remediation strategy, unintentionally widen the gaps they were trying to close. Students who needed to move forward were held back.

This matters for the position that we take next.

The First Weeks Back

Begin with felt safety, routine and connection.

Following an extended period of disruption and distance learning, students may return to school carrying more than just missed content. Depending on the nature and intensity of the disruption, some may have experienced disrupted sleep, heightened family anxiety, exposure to unsettling news or imagery, or distress over events affecting friends, extended family, or the country of origin.

The international evidence on students returning to school after collective stress is consistent: the academic moves that follow in this brief land more reliably and faster during the first weeks and months back, and they deliberately re-establish the conditions in which effective learning is possible.

This is not a wellbeing programme bolted on to the timetable. It is the way the timetable should run in the early weeks following any period of disruption to in-person learning, calibrated to the nature and intensity of what students have experienced. After a short, low-stakes interruption, a brief acknowledgement and deliberate restart may be sufficient; after a longer or more distressing period, the full set of moves applies.

What schools should reinforce in the early weeks

Predictable daily rhythm

The shape of the day is the same every day in the first weeks back. Arrival, transitions, breaks, and endings are explicit, calm, and rehearsed, and protocols for any future emergency response are rehearsed in a positive and reassuring manner. Predictability does more for a stressed nervous system than any single intervention.

Warm, consistent first contact

Every student is greeted by name at the start of the day by a known adult. Form tutors and class teachers hold short, low-stakes connection moments at the start of every lesson in the first few weeks. Relationship is the most evidenced protective factor.

Name what students may be carrying proportionately

Acknowledge that recent weeks have been unsettling for many, that a range of feelings is normal, and that school is a place where students are safe and supported. Avoid prolonged whole-class processing of trauma; do not require students to share personal experiences.

Make it explicit who they can speak to, when and how.

Light academic load in the first days, ramping deliberately

Begin with high-success, familiar tasks that re-establish confidence and concentration before introducing new content. By the second week, the five academic moves in this brief are fully in play. The intent is rapid recalibration, not extended de-escalation.

Identify the small number who need more, early

Most students recover well with a strong universal offer. A small number - those with prior vulnerabilities, recent loss or significant exposure - will need more targeted support. Pastoral leads, the inclusion team and the school counsellor should establish a simple early-identification routine in the first few weeks, and a clear pathway to specialist support where needed.

Support for staff alongside students

Teachers and staff have lived through the same period. Conduct structured staff briefings in the first few weeks - what to expect, what to do, when to refer - protect both staff and students. Recognise visibly that staff wellbeing is a condition of student wellbeing, not an afterthought.

A note on proportion

The evidence cautions against two opposite errors:

Doing too little - moving straight back into a full academic timetable as if nothing had happened - leaves the foundations of attention, regulation and relationship unattended, and the academic catch-up will struggle to take.

On the other hand, doing too much - extended whole-class processing of distressing material, deficit framing of every student as traumatised, blanket counselling for those who do not need it - can amplify distress and entrench a sense of fragility.

The research consistently points to a brief, structured, universal offer with a clear, targeted pathway for the few who need more.

Accelerate, don't Remediate

Teach the current unit. Address gaps as they arise.

Teaching the current unit is what moves students forward. The missing prior knowledge can be brought in along the way.

When faced with learning recovery, there are essentially **two approaches**:

The first - remediation - says: students have missed content, so let's go back and re-teach it before moving on.

The second - acceleration - says: teach at grade level and address gaps at the moment the new learning needs it.

The research is emphatic: *acceleration wins*. The students who benefit most are the ones furthest behind. Remediation, done at scale, keeps them further back for longer.

Acceleration is not a technique. It is a stance. In practice, it means:

- Teach the current unit on the planned schedule.
- Before the unit starts, identify two or three things from prior learning that it genuinely depends on.
- Teach or revisit those specific things embedded in the first few lessons of the unit.
- For students whose gaps are too wide to close this way, offer short, intensive, small-group support.

Acceleration says: we trust our students, we trust our curriculum, and we keep moving forward.

The acceleration stance pre-dates the recent disruption by decades. The wider research literature places acceleration among the highest-impact instructional practices and ability grouping or streaming at near-zero or negative effect. The harm of placing students in below-grade or lower-track content is documented across decades of tracking research. Predictably, many of the more recent studies related to research conducted post-Covid. However, pre-pandemic studies of routine schooling - examining what students are given to do compared with what they are capable of - showed that below-grade work is itself a key driver of inequity, long before any specific disruption.

Communicating with parents. Parents will reasonably ask whether their child is "behind". The acceleration stance is to be communicated to families with care: that students are taught the grade-level curriculum on the planned schedule; that gaps are addressed precisely as each unit needs it; that students furthest behind benefit most from this approach; and that schools will be in personal contact with parents whose child needs additional small-group or in-class support. Schools are expected to make this stance, and what it means for each child, visible to parents in their regular communication.

Five practical moves

These five moves are based on what has been shown to work in schools internationally. Taken together, they form the minimum expectations of this brief, required of every Dubai private school.

Leaders are expected to put all five in place, adapting them for age, phase and need.

Move 1 – Diagnose from the unit, not from the student

Before the next unit begins, ask: what does this unit genuinely require students to know, understand and be able to do? Then check - with a short task or a handful of targeted questions - whether they know it. That is your diagnosis.

Broad screening tests that are not linked to a clear next step tend to add burden without adding value. A short, focused check that sets up the next two weeks of teaching is worth ten standardised screens sitting in a folder.

For *students of determination*, the diagnostic is doubly-framed. What does the unit need, and what does the Individual Education Plan (IEP) already tell us about the scaffolds that will make it reachable? Reading the two together is the expectation.

For *our youngest children*, diagnostics are observational. Short checks in the flow of play and guided activity tell you more about phonemic awareness, early number sense, oracy and self-regulation than a sit-down test ever will.

For the leadership team

Are diagnostics shaping teaching, not just filling a tracker?

Is the Individual Education Plan record informing the diagnosis for every student of determination?

For teachers

Start with the unit. Work backwards to what students need to know.

That is the diagnosis.

Read the IEP alongside the unit.

Move 2 – Teach grade level, scaffold just in time

Hold the ambition. Teach what comes next. In the first lesson or two of a new unit, include a short, deliberate activation of the prior knowledge the unit depends on.

If the unit is quadratic equations for Year 9, you are not re-teaching algebra from Year 8. You are spending five minutes on the specific linear-equations move that quadratics rely on - and then moving on.

For students of determination, scaffolding at grade level is the point: visual supports, worked examples, sentence frames, pre-teaching of key vocabulary, assistive technology, and an adjusted pace. Lowering the expectation is almost always the wrong adjustment.

In the early years, “grade-level” means age-appropriate teaching delivered through play, talk, and guided practice.

Structured phonics, number rhymes, repeated storybooks and adult-modelled language are the scaffolds - not watered-down versions of older children’s work.

For the leadership team

Are unit plans naming the prior knowledge to activate, or are they still reverting to broad-brush revision? Do the plans make age-appropriate and inclusive scaffolds visible?

For teachers

“What does this unit need them to know?” is a more useful question than “What have they missed?”

Move 3 – Protect attendance and belonging

No catch-up plan survives poor attendance. Students who are not in the classroom cannot be taught. We confirmed an average attendance rate of 90% in early data on students' return to classroom learning. Schools should prioritise working closely with the remaining 10%.

After a long period of disruption, attendance patterns need deliberate attention - especially for students who were thriving before and have become quietly absent since.

Strong attendance is built through a combination of close tracking (who is missing, for which groups, for how long), clear expectations, visible care, and early personal contact with families when students' attendance start to slip.

Belonging matters alongside attendance. Students who feel noticed, respected and known are more likely to attend and engage.

Attendance and engagement should be tracked together. Attendance and engagement are related but distinct, and schools are expected to track both. The relationship between attendance and outcomes is well-evidenced regardless of any specific disruption: the wider research on summer learning loss and on early-grade attendance shows that even short attendance gaps compound over time. Locally, KHDA's own Dubai-sector work has documented how schools used wellbeing data and engagement signals to identify students at risk during periods of distance learning. The evidence does not depend on a specific cause of absence to be useful here.

For students of determination, the reasons for absence are often specific (sensory factors, transitions, anxiety, medical needs).

Track by group and include the inclusion lead in every early conversation with the family - not only when thresholds are breached.

In early years, even small daily absences compound quickly into lost language, routine, and social development time. Attendance in this phase is a school-readiness issue, not a compliance issue.

For the leadership team

Are we tracking attendance by group (including students of determination and early years), and acting before patterns set?

For teachers

Relationships combined with clear expectations framed in a spirit of reassurance are a critically important condition of recovery.

Move 4 – Use small-group, teacher-led support – sparingly and well

High-dosage, small-group, teacher-led support, done sparingly and well, is the single strongest intervention in the evidence.

For students whose gaps are too wide to close inside normal teaching, the most effective thing a school can do is small-group, high-frequency, short-duration support. This should largely be a question of redeploying the capacity a school already has: existing teachers and learning assistants, working in different patterns and at different times, with tighter targeting. The conditions that make it work are well-understood: three or more sessions a week, groups of between one-to-one and one-to-four, at least half an hour each, and carefully aligned with the classroom curriculum so that the tutoring reinforces - rather than competes with - what is happening in lessons. The shift schools need to make is therefore organisational rather than financial: using the staff, rooms and timetable they already have more deliberately, and concentrating that effort on the pupils who need it most rather than spreading it thin.

Students of determination will be disproportionately represented in the group for whom in-class scaffolding is not enough. Group composition should be built around shared learning

needs, not category of need - and teaching assistants should be used to supplement high-quality teaching, not to substitute for it.

For the early years, “small-group dose” usually means more adult-led oracy, shared reading and guided-practice rounds - not formal tutoring. The conditions still hold: short, frequent, aligned, adult-led.

For the leadership team

Who are the students for whom in-class support will not be enough - and does our tutoring offer meet the conditions that matter? Is TA deployment supporting teaching or substituting for it?

For teachers

Focus on fewer students, with greater depth and better impact.

Move 5 – Do the ordinary things extraordinarily well

Most of the recovery, for most students, will happen in ordinary, well-planned lessons.

That means:

Gradual release of responsibility. Show them. Do it with them. Have them do it.

Retrieval practice. Short, regular retrieval of prior learning, built into every lesson.

Spaced practice. Revisiting important ideas over weeks - not only the day they are taught.

High-quality questioning. Not hands up, but targeted questions that check every student’s understanding. Listening carefully to their responses and asking supplementary questions as necessary.

Feedback that moves learning forward. Specific, actionable, fast.

Practice to fluency. Enough repetition, in the right conditions, to make it stick.

For *students of determination*, these ordinary things done extraordinarily well matter more, not less. Explicit instruction, worked examples, frequent retrieval, checking for understanding and flexible grouping are the engine of inclusive teaching.

In the early years, “the ordinary things” means daily story time, rich adult-child talk, structured phonics, number fluency, singing, movement and social play - held precious as daily rhythms, not treated as optional extras when curriculum time is pressed.

These practices are not new, but consistent execution matters.

The most powerful thing a school can do this year is protect the time, training and leadership attention that let teachers do these things very well in every lesson.

For secondary students specifically. Secondary learners lost the most ground in measured attainment in international evidence and have been the slowest to recover. The five moves apply with sharper attention to: disengagement after disruption (Move 3); examination anxiety and pacing decisions in the run-up to terminal assessments (Moves 1 and 5); the temptation to pull whole classes back into prior-term revision near the end of the cycle (Move 2 - see also “What schools are expected to move away from”); and the use of small-group teacher-led support (Move 4) for students whose gaps in foundational subjects are too wide to close in-class. The response is the same five moves - adapted with precision for this group, not a parallel programme.

For the leadership team

Are we protecting time and CPD for instructional quality, or is recovery creating peripheral busyness?

For teachers

The basics, done very well in every lesson, remain the most reliable engine of catch-up.

Students of determination – minimum expectations

Students of determination lose more ground during an extended period of disruption and are slower to recover.

The reasons are practical: reduced access to individualised support and routines, harder transitions in and out of different learning modes, and thinner opportunities for sustained and/or skilled adult attention.

The implication is not a parallel and uniquely different programme. It is the five moves above, applied with precision for this group.

What this looks like in practice

Every Individual Education Plan is live.

Reviewed against the current unit's prerequisites, known to every teacher who teaches the child, and used to shape scaffolds in the next two weeks of lessons.

Ambition is held; adaptation is precise.

Scaffolds - visuals, sentence frames, pre-teaching, worked examples, adjusted pace, assistive technology - make grade-level content reachable. Lowered expectations are almost never the right adjustment.

Learning assistants support learning, not replace teaching.

Deployment is actively managed, tasks are purposeful and pre-briefed, and alignment with the teacher's lesson intention is visible.

Small-group support is based on learning need.

Where Move 4 support is used, groups form around shared learning needs rather than a category of need; the dosage conditions apply in full.

Attendance and belonging are co-owned with inclusion.

Attendance is tracked separately for this group; the inclusion lead is part of every early conversation with the family when patterns slip.

Quality of first teaching comes first.

Explicit instruction, worked examples, frequent retrieval, checking for understanding and flexible grouping are load-bearing. Most adjustments are made inside ordinary lessons.

Our youngest learners – minimum expectations

Among school-age children, across multiple studies and meta-studies, secondary students lost the most measured ground.

But it is the youngest children who sit at the most consequential developmental window. Those who were in early years and early primary during the disruption lost adult-led talk, peer interaction, structured play, and the daily repetition of routines through which language, self-regulation and early literacy develop.

The good news is that what is lost here is easily recoverable - but only with sustained, adult-led attention to the daily rhythms of early learning. Acceleration in this phase is not faster content; it is richer, more deliberate, adult-led early experiences, held precious as daily practice.

What this looks like in practice

Oral language and communication are priority one

Rich adult-child talk, shared storybooks, songs and rhymes run through the day. High-impact, age-appropriate oracy work is not an add-on; it is the daily engine.

Systematic phonics is secure

Taught daily, with fidelity, and matched books for every child, with additional short, daily practice for children at risk of falling behind.

Number sense is built daily

Counting, subitising, simple pattern and number-talk, through routines and play - not worksheets.

Self-regulation and attention are deliberately taught

Through predictable routines, clear expectations, and adult-modelled strategies - not as behaviour management, but as part of the curriculum.

Fine and gross motor development is protected

Physical play, mark-making, manipulatives and outdoor time held across the week; these are foundations, not filler.

Transitions are planned for, not assumed

Within the day, and into the next year group, with time given to the social and emotional side, not just the curriculum side.

Families are partners, not audiences

Short, practical sharing of what children are working on, simple routines for at-home talk and shared reading, warm early contact when patterns slip.

In early years, the risk is the opposite of “remediation” as it appears further up the school: it is the premature formalisation of learning, replacing talk and play with worksheets. The evidence is clear that the high-impact moves in this phase are the age-appropriate ones, done very well, every day.

What to avoid

The research is clear about what has not worked:

Five practices schools are expected to move away from

- 01 Whole-class re-teaching of prior-year content**
It slows everyone down and widens the gap for those most in need of acceleration.
- 02 Streaming or setting by perceived gap**
It locks students into lower expectations and blunts the acceleration effect.
- 03 Testing without next-step action**
Diagnostics only matter if they change teaching.
- 04 Layering on off-the-shelf catch-up products**
Programmes that sit outside the main teaching sequence compete with it for time and rarely reinforce it.
- 05 Over-formalising the early years**
Replacing talk, play and routine with worksheets and sit-down tasks, in the belief that it looks like “catch-up”. The evidence is the other way.

A note on context.

The practices above are a year-round risk in any high-mobility, heterogeneous-intake sector and are not specific to any one disruption. The wider research base on tracking, on student opportunity and on the effects of below-grade content is consistent: whole-class re-teaching of prior-year content widens gaps regardless of the cause of those gaps. The expectation to move away from these practices applies in ordinary as well as post-disruption conditions.

All of these come from good intentions. The evidence is clear; however, schools are expected to move away from them in favour of the five moves set out above.

A closing word

Dubai's private schools have repeatedly demonstrated resilience and professionalism during periods of disruption. Teachers adapted. Leaders held teams together. Students kept learning in really challenging conditions.

The gaps that emerge in such situations are real - but they are closable, and the evidence on how is clearer than ever.

- Teach ambitiously.
- Scaffold precisely.
- Watch attendance and belonging as if they matter, because they do.
- Use small-group support for the students who really need it.
- Hold our students of determination and our youngest learners in particular care.
- And do the ordinary things extraordinarily well.

ANNEX A

A note for teachers

The stance, in a sentence. Teach at grade level. Address gaps at the point they are needed. Do not hold students in last year's content while they wait to catch up - the evidence is clear that this widens the very gap we are trying to close.

Five things that help most

- Diagnose from the unit you are about to teach - identify the two or three prior items it genuinely depends on.
- Teach at grade level - scaffold just in time at the start of the unit, not across the year.
- Protect attendance and belonging - relationships are a condition of recovery, not a supplement to it.
- Use high-dosage, small-group support for those who really need it - fewer, deeper, better.
- Do the ordinary things extraordinarily well - modelling, retrieval, questioning, feedback, practice to fluency.

For students of determination

- Read the Individual Education Plan alongside the unit – use the two together to shape the scaffold.
- Maintain ambition; precisely adapt. Lowered expectations are almost always the wrong adjustment.
- TAs supplement teaching; they do not replace it. Pre-briefed, aligned, purposeful.

In the early years

- Prioritise rich talk, shared storybooks, songs and rhymes. Oracy is the engine.
- Deliver systematic phonics that are taught daily with fidelity; matched books for every child.
- Build number sense through routines and play; self-regulation taught as part of the curriculum.
- Protect motor development, outdoor time and play - they are foundations, not filler.

Five traps to watch for

- Re-teaching prior-year content to the whole class.
- Streaming by perceived gap.
- Disconnected catch-up programmes that sit outside the main teaching sequence.
- Testing without actions or clear next steps.
- Over-formalising the early years - replacing talk and play with worksheets.

Your leadership team will share how this translates into the school's plan. Thank you for the care and professionalism you bring to your students every day.