What England’s Schools Are Really Saying About the Digital Divide

25 March 2025



In 2025, it’s tempting to assume the digital divide in education is a thing of the past. Technology use surged during the pandemic. Government funding followed. Many pupils now have access to devices.

But through our outreach at The School Supply Network (SSN), we’ve been listening directly to headteachers, trust leaders, SEND coordinators, and IT managers across England—and the message is clear:

The digital divide hasn’t gone away. It’s just evolved.

Many schools are still battling with unreliable Wi-Fi, outdated systems, limited digital leadership, and inconsistent home access. It’s no longer just about who has a laptop—it’s about infrastructure, inclusion, and implementation.

SSN’s National Listening Project: What We Did

Between January and March 2025, The School Supply Network:

- Interviewed school leaders and digital leads across England
- Conducted follow-ups with MATs and federations in all regions
- Analysed recent Department for Education policy and infrastructure plans
- Collected school-submitted case studies and feedback via our digital equity callout

This report shares those voices—alongside context from the £45 million DfE digital investment and how suppliers can truly make an impact.

A Welcome Step: The Government's £45 Million Investment

In early 2025, the Department for Education pledged £45 million to support digital connectivity in schools. The funding includes:

- £25 million for wireless infrastructure upgrades
- £20 million for fibre broadband expansion
- Support for over 1,000 schools identified as high-need
- A national target: every school meeting six digital infrastructure standards by 2030 (covering broadband, Wi-Fi, digital leadership, cybersecurity and more)

"This investment is about ensuring that no school is held back because of poor infrastructure."
— DfE Spokesperson, March 2025

The announcement was welcomed by educators. But as one head told us:

"It's not just about routers. It's about having the people, training, and strategy to make those routers mean something."

What Schools Are Still Facing: The Reality on the Ground

Despite the investment, schools continue to face recurring challenges:

- **Patchy Wi-Fi** in older buildings, making modern teaching tools unusable in parts of the site
- **Inadequate broadband speeds**, especially in rural and coastal regions
- **Lack of in-house digital leadership**, with many SLTs feeling unprepared to make big IT decisions
- **Unequal home access**, with pupils in social housing or rural areas still offline
- **SEND exclusion**, where assistive technology is limited by poor connectivity or lack of compatibility

"We still have pupils doing homework on phones in the back of their parents' cars because their home doesn't have Wi-Fi."

— Secondary Headteacher, West Yorkshire

Case Studies: What Progress Looks Like

Oldham – Multi Academy Trust

Focused on SEND provision, the trust used DfE funding to deploy 3D-printed assistive tools, speech recognition tech, and stable Wi-Fi across sites.

“Connectivity isn’t a luxury—it’s how our students learn, speak, and participate.”
— Joanne Thompson, Head of Digital Inclusion

Lincolnshire – Primary Federation

Five schools joined forces to share broadband upgrades, improving remote learning and digital assessments.

“We couldn’t even stream a class last year. Now our teachers collaborate live across schools.”
— Martin Rees, Executive Head

Tower Hamlets –Academy

Located in one of London’s most deprived boroughs, the school invested in staff training, safeguarding systems, and digital planning capacity.

“Tech is now embedded in our culture, not just a bolt-on.”
— Sarah Khan, Deputy Head

Cornwall – Coastal Secondary Cluster

With fibre unavailable, these schools implemented microwave broadband, unlocking reliable connectivity for GCSE prep and hybrid learning.

What Schools Really Need Now

From SSN’s conversations, six key themes emerged:

- **Wi-Fi that reaches every classroom and hall**, not just admin blocks
- **Broadband speeds capable of handling full school usage**, including hybrid CPD and student assessments
- **Digital strategy leadership**, with SLTs empowered to plan and invest

wisely
- **Home learning access support**, including MiFi devices, mobile broadband, and usage tracking
- **SEND-compatible infrastructure**, especially for voice tools, screen readers, and adaptive devices
- **Clear procurement guidance**, so schools aren't left navigating the tech maze alone

"Don't just give us tools. Give us the roadmap to use them well."
— Headteacher, East Midlands

A New Era: What the Procurement Act 2023 Means for Schools

Under the Procurement Act 2023, schools and trusts now have greater freedom to procure independently, expanding their supplier options and breaking away from restrictive national frameworks.

This opens the door to:

- Local and regional specialists
- Innovative SMEs and niche providers
- More agile, responsive supplier relationships

But with greater freedom comes greater complexity—and schools need trusted guidance more than ever.

How Schools Prefer to Discover and Engage with Suppliers

Schools told us they're not anti-supplier—they're anti-waste, anti-disruption, and anti-confusion. The most effective engagement happens through:

Peer networks and federations

If a solution comes recommended by another school or local trust, it's immediately more credible.

Trusted sector publications and platforms

Schools are much more likely to follow up on suppliers featured in reputable education sites like The School Supply Network.

□ Regional events and MAT CPD days

Suppliers who contribute to knowledge-sharing, not just selling, are remembered and welcomed.

□ Structured info packs and digital toolkits

Procurement teams value resources that are easy to circulate, compare, and present to governors.

“I don’t need another sales call. I need a partner who understands what works in schools like mine.”
— SBM, South London

What Doesn’t Work Anymore

- □ Cold calls to school offices
- □ Generic email blasts
- □ One-size-fits-all pitches without relevance to the school’s context
- □ Lack of clarity on pricing, licensing, and long-term support

Collaboration Over Conversion

The digital divide in schools will not be solved by funding alone—or by product placement. It will be solved through collaboration, clarity, and trust.

At The School Supply Network, we’re committed to being the platform that listens to schools and connects them with solutions that genuinely meet their needs.