Improving School Attendance in 2026: Practical Procurement Ideas for Leaders

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Attendance is often discussed as a data problem. Schools track it, analyse it, report it and compare it.

But behind the numbers are real children, families and barriers. Some pupils are anxious. Some are disengaged. Some are caring for siblings. Some are affected by poverty, illness, transport problems, bullying, unmet SEND needs or a difficult relationship with school.

The national picture has improved slightly, but absence remains a major issue. The Children's Commissioner reported that overall absence in 2024/25 fell from 7.2% to 6.8%, while persistent absence fell from around 20% to around 18%. That is progress, but persistent absence remains much higher than before the pandemic. (Children's Commissioner)

So what can schools do beyond letters, meetings and attendance codes?

There is no single product that fixes attendance. But procurement decisions can support a wider attendance strategy when they remove practical barriers and help pupils feel safe, welcome and ready to learn.

Attendance is not just an admin issue

Schools need strong attendance systems. They need accurate registers, clear processes, good communication and timely follow-up.

But attendance is also linked to the everyday experience of school.

Does the pupil feel safe when they arrive? Do they have breakfast? Do they have the right uniform? Is there a calm place to go if they feel overwhelmed? Can parents communicate easily with the school? Are patterns being spotted early enough?

This is where practical resources, services and suppliers can make a difference.

Make arrival easier

For some pupils, the hardest part of the day is getting through the gate.

Schools are increasingly thinking about the arrival experience: who greets pupils, where they go, what happens if they are late, and whether the start of the day feels calm or stressful.

Small operational changes can help. A covered waiting area, clearer signage, a breakfast club, a soft-start space or a staffed wellbeing room can make the morning feel more manageable.

Schools may want to look at:

- Breakfast club equipment and catering supplies
- Outdoor shelters and covered walkways
- Reception and signing-in systems
- Late arrival processes
- Calm spaces near the entrance
- Parent communication tools
- Uniform support or spare clothing storage

These are not attendance gimmicks. They are practical ways to reduce friction at the point where absence often begins.

Breakfast provision still matters

A hungry pupil is less likely to learn well. For some families, breakfast clubs also solve a practical problem around work, transport and morning routines.

Breakfast provision can support punctuality, social connection and readiness to learn. It gives pupils a reason to arrive earlier and provides staff with a softer opportunity to spot concerns before lessons begin.

Schools considering breakfast provision need to think about more than food. They may need tables, seating, storage, serving equipment, allergy processes, cleaning supplies, waste management and staffing arrangements.

A poorly planned breakfast club can create extra pressure. A well-planned one can become a valuable part of the attendance and wellbeing offer.

Uniform and hygiene barriers are real

Attendance conversations sometimes overlook simple barriers.

A pupil may avoid school because their uniform is dirty, damaged, too small or does not match policy. Another may be worried about body odour, period products, washing facilities or not having appropriate PE kit.

These issues can be embarrassing, so pupils may not explain them directly. Instead, they may arrive late, avoid certain lessons or stop coming in.

Schools can help by creating discreet support systems:

- Spare uniform stock
- Uniform exchange schemes
- PE kit banks
- Hygiene product supplies
- Period product access
- Laundry support where appropriate
- Private storage and collection points

This does not mean lowering expectations. It means removing avoidable barriers so pupils can meet them.

Wellbeing spaces should be purposeful

Many schools now have some form of wellbeing room, reflection space or pastoral base. These spaces can support attendance, especially for pupils who find busy classrooms, corridors or social times overwhelming.

But the space has to be carefully managed. If it becomes a place pupils go to avoid learning entirely, it can unintentionally reinforce absence from lessons. If it is too clinical or poorly resourced, pupils may not use it.

A good wellbeing space should have a clear purpose. It might be used for short regulation breaks, reintegration after absence, check-ins with pastoral staff, small group work or supported transitions back into lessons.

Useful resources may include:

- Comfortable but school-appropriate seating
- Soft lighting
- Visual timetables
- Regulation tools
- Low-distraction workstations
- Storage for pastoral resources
- Calm displays
- Access to water and basic supplies

The aim is not to make school optional. It is to help pupils stay in school when they might otherwise go home or not attend at all.

Technology can help, but relationships still matter

Attendance software, messaging platforms and analytics tools can help schools spot patterns and communicate quickly with families.

They can show whether absence is linked to particular days, lessons, year groups, transport issues or family circumstances. They can reduce admin time and help staff intervene earlier.

But technology is not a substitute for relationships. A text message may prompt a response, but a trusted adult often finds out what is really going on.

When choosing attendance technology, schools should ask:

- Does it save staff time or add another system?
- Can it identify useful patterns clearly?
- Is communication accessible for parents?
- Does it integrate with existing MIS systems?

- Is data presented in a way pastoral teams can act on?
- Does it support early help rather than just escalation?

The best systems help staff have better conversations, not fewer conversations.

Outdoor and social spaces affect belonging

Pupils are more likely to attend when they feel they belong.

Belonging is shaped in classrooms, but also in corridors, lunch queues, playgrounds, toilets, changing rooms and social spaces. If these areas feel unsafe, overcrowded or unpleasant, pupils may begin to avoid school.

Improving social spaces does not always require a major rebuild. Schools might consider seating areas, supervised quiet zones, better dining layouts, playground markings, outdoor shelters, improved toilets or clearer behaviour zoning.

For some pupils, lunchtime is the most difficult part of the day. A calm alternative space or structured activity can make staying in school feel more possible.

Attendance rewards need care

Some schools use rewards to encourage attendance. These can work for some pupils, but they need to be handled carefully.

Rewarding perfect attendance can unintentionally exclude pupils with medical needs, disabilities or unavoidable family circumstances. It can also create pressure for unwell pupils to attend when they should stay home.

A better approach may be to recognise improvement, effort, punctuality or engagement with support. Schools should think carefully about what they are rewarding and whether it is fair.

Procurement linked to rewards — certificates, badges, trips, vouchers or celebration events — should sit within a thoughtful attendance policy, not replace one.

Think in barriers, not just percentages

When schools review attendance, it can help to group barriers into practical categories:

- **Basic needs:** food, uniform, hygiene, equipment
- **Emotional barriers:** anxiety, low confidence, school refusal
- **Safety concerns:** bullying, toilets, corridors, travel routes
- **SEND needs:** sensory overload, unmet support, transitions
- **Family barriers:** communication, transport, routines, caring responsibilities
- **Curriculum barriers:** disengagement, gaps in learning, fear of failure

Each category may require different support, and some of that support may involve suppliers, services or resources.

Procurement cannot fix attendance alone

No school should be sold the idea that a product can solve persistent absence on its own.

Attendance is complex. It needs leadership, pastoral work, safeguarding, curriculum thinking, family support and sometimes help from wider services.

But practical barriers matter. A pupil who has breakfast, clean uniform, a calm arrival, a safe toilet, a trusted adult and a place to regulate is more likely to stay connected to school than one who has none of those things.

Good procurement supports good relationships. It gives staff the tools, spaces and systems to act earlier and more effectively.

In 2026, improving attendance is not only about chasing absence. It is about making school a place pupils can get into, stay in and return to.

That is a practical challenge as much as a policy one — and it is one schools can start addressing, one barrier at a time.

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