

The School Buying Reset 2026: From Supplier Search to Supplier Strategy

6 May 2026



Feature Report

A Final Review of the Six-Part Programme from The School Network

The School Buying Reset 2026

Over the past six weeks, The School Buying Reset 2026 has brought together a focused, procurement relevant audience of school leaders, business managers, governors, trustees and MAT decision makers around one central question.

How can schools buy with greater confidence, stronger value and wider supplier choice in 2026?

6 Parts

A structured school buying journey delivered over six connected themes.

6 Weeks

Sustained engagement around procurement confidence, value and supplier choice.

6,700+

School decision makers and procurement influencers engaged across England.

Introduction

Across six connected parts, The School Network explored the financial, operational, legislative and supplier choice pressures shaping school procurement in 2026.

The aim of the series was simple: to give schools practical structure, clearer thinking and greater confidence at a time when buying decisions are carrying more weight than ever before.

This was not designed as a one off article, short campaign or standalone procurement update.

It was designed as a structured school buying journey, giving decision makers time to reflect on current procurement habits, understand the Procurement Act 2023, question framework dependency, identify priority categories and build confidence around next steps.

The strength of the series was not only the content itself, but the quality and relevance of the audience enrolled into it: the people responsible for shaping, approving, scrutinising and implementing school buying decisions in real life.

Schools are not short of suppliers. They are short of procurement confidence, process and market visibility.

Thank You to Everyone Who Took Part

We would like to thank every School Business Manager, School Business Leader, Headteacher, Principal, Governor, Trustee, Finance Lead, Operations Lead, MAT leader and school professional who engaged with The School Buying Reset 2026.

Your involvement helped make this more than a content series.

It became a structured school buying conversation around the issues that matter

most in 2026: how to protect budgets, evidence value, use the Procurement Act with confidence, move beyond default buying habits, compare suppliers more effectively and build better procurement processes year after year.

The feedback throughout the series was clear. Schools are not short of suppliers. They are short of procurement confidence, process and market visibility.

That insight now shapes the next stage of The School Network.

What the Series Covered

The School Buying Reset 2026 was built around six connected areas of school procurement confidence.

Part 1: Procurement as a Strategic Priority

Why Procurement Can No Longer Be Treated as Admin explored why school buying decisions now have a direct impact on resilience, budget protection, pupil outcomes and long term sustainability.

Part 2: Understanding the Procurement Act 2023

What the Procurement Act 2023 Really Changes for Schools and Trusts translated the new procurement landscape into practical school language.

Part 3: Framework Dependency

The Hidden Cost of Framework Dependency looked at why frameworks can be useful, but should not become the ceiling of school choice.

Part 4: The Wider Market Playbook

How Schools Can Open Up Competition Safely gave schools a practical process for defining needs, testing the market and comparing suppliers.

Part 5: High Impact Buying Categories

Where Wider Market Buying Can Make the Biggest Difference identified the categories where procurement improvement can create the greatest return.

Part 6: Lasting Procurement Confidence

How Schools Can Buy Better Every Year brought the series together by focusing on repeatable capability and stronger buying processes.

A Focused School Buying Audience, Engaged Over Six Weeks

One of the most important strengths of The School Buying Reset 2026 has been the profile of the audience enrolled into the series.

This has not been a broad, passive education readership. It has been a practical, procurement relevant and solution seeking school audience made up of the people responsible for managing spend, reviewing suppliers, approving budgets, scrutinising value and implementing change.

Across the completed six part programme, The School Buying Reset 2026 engaged more than 6,700 school decision makers and procurement influencers across England.

Audience Metric	Profile
Total engaged audience	6,700+ school decision makers and procurement influencers
School Business / Operations audience	2,200+ School Business Managers, School Business Leaders and business or operations professionals
Senior leadership audience	3,200+ Headteachers, Principals and senior school leaders
Governance / MAT audience	1,300+ Governors, Trustees and MAT central team members
Core school settings	Primary schools, secondary schools, special schools, single academies, maintained schools and multi academy trusts
Geographic reach	England wide, aligned to the Procurement Act 2023 and DfE school procurement context

Audience Metric	Profile
Engagement style	Practical, procurement focused, solution seeking and centred on supplier choice, value and confidence

This matters because school procurement is rarely shaped by one job title alone.

School Business Managers and business or operations teams make the buying process happen. Headteachers and senior leaders set priorities and approve direction. Governors, trustees and MAT central teams scrutinise value, governance, compliance and long term supplier decisions.

Together, this created a highly relevant audience around the practical decisions schools are now having to make.

Who Engaged With the Series?

School Business and Operations Leaders

School Business Managers, School Business Leaders, Finance and Resources Managers, Directors of Operations, Operations Managers, Procurement Leads and estates or facilities linked business roles.

Headteachers and Senior Leaders

Headteachers, Principals, Executive Headteachers, Deputy Heads and senior leadership teams connecting procurement to school improvement and pupil outcomes.

Governors, Trustees and MAT Central Teams

Governors, Chairs of Governors, Trustees, MAT CFOs, MAT COOs, Directors of Finance, Directors of Operations, Procurement Leads, Estates Directors and IT leaders.

Procurement Influencers

The people shaping scrutiny, governance, benchmarking, value for money and scalable supplier decisions across schools and trusts.

School Profile

The series reached a commercially relevant mix of school settings across England.

School Profile	Why This Matters
Primary schools	High volume recurring purchasing across resources, ICT, utilities, cleaning, catering, facilities, SEND support and professional services
Secondary schools	Larger budgets, greater operational complexity and significant non staff spend across estates, ICT, energy and services
Special schools	Strong relevance around SEND support, specialist provision, safeguarding, equipment, transport, estates and compliance
Single academies and maintained schools	Local decision making, delegated budgets and practical need for procurement support
Small to medium MATs	Multi site influence, aggregated spend opportunities and scalable supplier or service decisions
Larger MAT contacts	Strategic influence around procurement consistency, supplier performance, category review and trust wide value

This gave the series a strong balance between local purchasing relevance and wider organisational buying influence.

One off reach creates awareness. Sustained engagement creates intent.

What the Engagement Tells Us

The engagement across the series shows that school decision makers are not looking for more noise. They are looking for structure.

They want practical ways to understand the market, compare suppliers, evidence value, avoid unnecessary risk and make better decisions under pressure.

Series Theme	What Schools Were Working Through
Procurement as a leadership issue	How to move school buying away from reactive admin and into strategic planning
Procurement Act 2023 confidence	How to understand the new rules in plain English and apply flexibility responsibly
Framework dependency	How to avoid default buying while still protecting compliance and value for money
Wider market buying	How to test the market, compare suppliers and open up competition safely
High impact categories	Where better procurement can make the biggest difference across spend, service, compliance and outcomes
Lasting procurement capability	How to build repeatable processes, stronger governance and better supplier strategy year after year

The message from the series is clear: 2026 school procurement is not defined by one single issue. It is defined by the connection between pressures.

Budgets, SEND demand, estates risk, digital infrastructure, contract renewals, supplier performance, compliance and governance are no longer separate conversations.

Together, they form the school buying agenda now facing education decision makers.

The Buying Areas Now Shaping School Decisions

The series highlighted how closely connected supplier decisions have become.

- A discussion about budget pressure quickly becomes a discussion about energy, catering, cleaning, ICT contracts, staffing support and contract renewals.
- A discussion about SEND demand quickly becomes a discussion about specialist provision, assistive technology, transport, training,

safeguarding and external support.

- A discussion about estates pressure quickly becomes a discussion about maintenance, compliance, fire safety, access control, energy efficiency and planned works.
- A discussion about digital infrastructure quickly becomes a discussion about connectivity, cyber security, devices, MIS, safeguarding technology, support models and licensing.
- A discussion about governance quickly becomes a discussion about documentation, benchmarking, supplier comparison, audit trails and value for money.

This is why the six parts of the series were designed to connect. Schools are not facing six separate procurement issues. They are facing one connected supplier strategy challenge.

Category Interest Across the Series

The highest interest areas were the categories where cost, risk and service quality are changing fastest.

Category	Why Schools Are Reviewing
Energy and utilities	Cost volatility, contract timing, supplier performance and efficiency opportunities
Estates, maintenance and minor works	Safety, planned works, response times, compliance and whole life value
ICT, connectivity and digital services	Digital infrastructure, cyber security, MIS, devices, support and licensing
Catering and food services	Food inflation, quality, sustainability, allergen management and pupil uptake
Cleaning and facilities services	Service quality, supervision, health and safety and the daily school environment
SEND support and specialist provision	Rising demand, specialist provision, budget pressure and pupil suitability
Security, access control and fire safety	Safeguarding, compliance, site risk and integrated technology

Category	Why Schools Are Reviewing
HR, legal, finance and training	Risk management, governance, compliance and leadership support
Classroom resources and curriculum materials	Aggregated spend, resource quality, subscriptions and curriculum relevance
Sustainability and energy efficiency	Decarbonisation, funding, payback periods, long term savings and implementation risk

These are not marginal buying areas. They are categories that directly affect budgets, compliance, daily operations, pupil experience and long term resilience.

Why the Six Part Structure Mattered

The School Buying Reset 2026 was not designed as a one off feature. It was built as a sustained six week journey because meaningful procurement confidence rarely comes from a single article, message or conversation.

Schools need time to recognise the issue, understand the rules, reflect on current buying habits, identify priority categories, discuss internally and build confidence around next steps.

By moving through six connected themes over six weeks, the series created repeated engagement with decision makers around the areas most likely to influence buying decisions in 2026.

That sustained engagement is one of the most important outcomes of the programme.

It allowed the series to move beyond general commentary and become a structured conversation around the practical supplier decisions schools are now being forced to make.

What This Means for the School Supplier Market

For the school supplier market, the value of this audience is not just its size. It is the context of engagement.

This is a 6,700+ strong audience of school decision makers and procurement influencers who have engaged around supplier choice, framework dependency, market testing, contract renewals, value for money, service quality, category specific pressure, compliance confidence, benchmarking and strategic supplier review.

This is not a cold audience. It is an audience that has already been taken through a structured buying conversation.

For credible suppliers that can genuinely help schools improve value, reduce pressure, strengthen service quality or support better outcomes, that context matters.

It means the conversation starts from relevance, not interruption.

Final Reflection

The School Buying Reset 2026 has shown that the schools best placed to move forward are not necessarily those with the largest teams, biggest budgets or most formal procurement departments.

They are the schools building clearer processes, better evidence, stronger market awareness and more confident decision making.

They are asking better questions.

- Are we choosing this route deliberately, or because it is familiar?
- Have we tested whether the wider market can offer better value?
- Are our specifications clear enough?
- Can we compare suppliers fairly?
- Are we documenting decisions properly?
- Are we using procurement to support better outcomes?

These are the questions that will shape the next phase of school buying.

Better school buying is not about choosing between frameworks and the wider market. It is about building the confidence to choose the right route, for the right need, at the right time.

Thank You

Thank you to everyone who engaged with The School Buying Reset 2026.

Across six parts and six weeks, the programme brought together a practical, procurement relevant school audience around the value, supplier choice, compliance, framework dependency and long term capability questions that will shape school buying in 2026 and beyond.

Your feedback has helped shape the next stage of The School Network.

The conclusion from the series is clear: better school buying is not about choosing between frameworks and the wider market. It is about building the confidence to choose the right route, for the right need, at the right time.

The next step is to turn insight into action, one category, one supplier review and one better buying decision at a time.

The School Buying Reset 2026

Delivered by The School Network.

A six part feature report programme supporting better school buying, stronger supplier choice and greater procurement confidence.