The School Buying Reset 2026: The Wider Market Playbook – How Schools Can Open Up Competition Safely

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Wider-market procurement is not about taking risks. It is about creating a better process before choosing the route. Here's a practical, step-by-step guide for schools.

This is Part 4 of **The School Buying Reset 2026**.

In Part 3, we explored the hidden costs of over-relying on frameworks. We established that while frameworks have a legitimate role, defaulting to them without testing the wider market can lead to missed value, reduced innovation and limited supplier choice.

Today we move from diagnosis to action: how schools can test the wider market without losing control of compliance, fairness or value for money.

The good news is that opening up competition does not have to be complicated or risky — provided schools follow a clear, well-structured process.

That is what this playbook is designed to help you do.

The Core Principle: Process Before Route

The single most important shift schools can make is this:

Focus first on the process, not the procurement route.
Route-first buying is where many problems begin. Schools choose a familiar route, then try to fit the need around it.

Strategic procurement does the opposite.

It defines the need first, understands the market second, and only then chooses the most suitable route.

Before you decide whether to use a framework, run a competitive process or use another approach, you should have already done the following:

- Clearly defined what you actually need, not just what you have bought before
- Understood the market and what good looks like
- Written a strong, outcome-focused specification
- Decided how you will evaluate responses fairly
- Understood the risks, approvals and documentation needed

Only once these foundations are in place should you choose the most appropriate route.

This is the mindset that turns reactive buying into strategic procurement.

The Wider Market Playbook: 7 Practical Steps

Here is a clear, repeatable process schools can use for most significant purchases.

Step 1: Define the Need Clearly

Start with outcomes, not solutions.

Instead of asking, “Do we need a new cleaning contract?”, ask:

What standard of cleanliness, responsiveness and value do we need to support a safe, welcoming learning environment?
The same principle applies across ICT, estates, catering, energy, SEND support, safeguarding technology and professional services.

The better the need is defined, the easier it becomes to compare suppliers fairly.

Step 2: Research the Market

Before committing to any route, spend time understanding what is available.

Schools can do this by:

- Speaking to other schools or trusts
- Reviewing recent tenders and published contract information
- Attending supplier events or briefings
- Speaking to potential suppliers in a fair and transparent way
- Using benchmarking and market intelligence where available

Early market engagement can help schools understand realistic costs, available solutions, supplier capacity and whether the existing specification is too narrow.

It also helps avoid one of the most common procurement mistakes: buying based on outdated assumptions.

Step 3: Write a Strong Specification

Good specifications focus on outcomes and performance rather than prescribing exact methods.

A weak specification says:

Provide X product or service in the same way as before.
A stronger specification says:

Deliver this outcome, to this standard, within these constraints, with clear evidence of quality, reliability and value.
Outcome-focused specifications give suppliers room to propose better solutions. They also help schools compare options more fairly because the decision is based on what the school actually needs.

Step 4: Decide Evaluation Criteria Early

Before suppliers respond, be clear about how they will be judged.

This may include:

- Price
- Quality
- Service levels
- Implementation support
- Whole-life cost
- Safeguarding and compliance
- Sustainability
- Social value
- Supplier experience
- Contract management and reporting

The weighting should reflect the school's priorities.

If service quality matters more than the lowest price, the evaluation criteria should make that clear.

This protects the school, supports fairness and helps suppliers respond properly.

Step 5: Choose the Right Route Proportionately

Once the need, market and evaluation criteria are clear, schools can choose the most suitable route.

That might include:

- A framework, if it still offers the best overall value and fit
- An open procedure, where appropriate
- A competitive flexible procedure for more complex or higher-value needs
- A proportionate lower-value process, where the purchase is lower risk and lower complexity

The right route depends on value, risk, complexity, urgency and internal governance.

The aim is not to avoid frameworks.

The aim is to choose the route deliberately, based on evidence.

Step 6: Document Everything

A good procurement process should leave a clear audit trail.

Schools should be able to show:

- What need was identified
- What market understanding was gathered
- Why a route was chosen
- How suppliers were compared
- How value was assessed
- Who approved the decision
- How risks and conflicts of interest were managed

This protects the school and demonstrates that the process was fair, transparent and value-driven.

Flexibility only works when it is supported by good documentation.

Step 7: Review and Learn

Procurement should not end when the contract is awarded.

After every significant purchase, schools should review:

- Whether the supplier delivered what was promised
- Whether costs remained under control
- Whether service levels were met
- What worked well in the process
- What could be improved next time

This builds organisational capability over time.

The goal is not just one better purchase.

The goal is a better way of buying year after year.

The Simple Test Before Choosing a Route

Before choosing a procurement route, schools should ask:

- Have we clearly defined the outcome we need?
- Do we understand what the market can offer?
- Have we avoided writing the specification around one supplier?
- Do we know how we will compare value, quality and risk?
- Can we explain and evidence our decision?

If the answer to those questions is yes, the school is in a much stronger position to choose the right route with confidence.

Governance and Risk Management

Opening up the market does not mean lowering standards.

In fact, the opposite is true.

To stay safe and compliant, schools should ensure they have:

- Clear internal approval processes
- Proper segregation of duties
- Conflict of interest checks
- Clear evaluation records

- Robust contract management after award
- Regular reviews of supplier performance

The Procurement Act 2023 rewards well-planned, well-documented procurement — not shortcuts.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

Schools should avoid:

- Jumping straight to a route before defining the need properly
- Writing specifications that are too prescriptive
- Evaluating on price alone when quality and service matter more
- Failing to keep proper records of decisions
- Choosing familiar suppliers without testing whether they still offer best value
- Failing to review supplier performance after the contract is awarded

What Comes Next

In Part 5, we will explore the categories where wider-market buying can deliver the biggest impact — from energy and estates to ICT, catering, SEND support and more.

Join The School Network

If you want to follow the full series and receive practical tools, templates and additional resources, we recommend joining **The School Network**.

The School Network exists to help schools move from supplier search to supplier strategy.

This series is designed to help schools take that first step — from reactive supplier search to confident supplier strategy.