The School Buying Reset 2026: Why Procurement Can No Longer Be Treated as Admin

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In today's financial climate, every buying decision has a direct impact on school resilience, pupil outcomes and long-term sustainability. It's time to treat procurement as a strategic priority.

School buying has changed — and the stakes are higher.

In 2026, school leaders, business managers, governors and MAT executives are making procurement decisions in one of the most challenging environments in recent years. Rising costs, growing SEND pressures, estates demands, staffing challenges and constrained budgets mean every pound spent on goods and services now carries greater weight.

This is Part 1 of **The School Buying Reset 2026** — our six-part series helping schools move from supplier search to supplier strategy.

We begin with the most important shift: procurement can no longer sit quietly in the background.

The New Reality: Procurement Now Directly Affects Outcomes

For too long, procurement in schools has been viewed as a back-office function. The assumption has often been: “As long as we stay compliant and get reasonable value, we’re doing enough.”

That assumption is breaking down.

Consider the facts. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned that schools face a particularly tight set of pressures in 2025–26, with mainstream school funding per pupil expected to grow by 5.8% in cash terms while school costs are expected to rise by 6.5%. At the same time, SEND demand continues to reshape school budgets and operational planning. Department for Education statistics show that 638,700 children and young people had an Education, Health and Care plan in January 2025, up 10.8% from January 2024.

These pressures do not stay in the finance office. They directly affect:

- The quality of resources and equipment available to teachers
- The condition of buildings and learning environments
- The ability to attract and retain specialist support staff
- The speed at which schools can respond to emerging needs

When procurement is treated as purely administrative, schools often default to the easiest or most familiar option. This can lead to higher long-term costs, missed opportunities for better value, and reduced flexibility when circumstances change.

In short: procurement decisions now have a direct line to pupil outcomes and school resilience.

Why “Good Enough” Procurement Is No

Longer Good Enough

Many schools continue to rely heavily on established frameworks because they feel safe and straightforward. There is nothing inherently wrong with using frameworks. They can provide speed, structure and a clear route to compliant buying.

However, when frameworks become the default rather than one option within a wider procurement strategy, schools can lose visibility of what else is available in the market.

They can find themselves:

- Staying with supplier relationships that may no longer represent the best available value
- Missing out on innovative or more cost-effective providers
- Repeating the same purchasing patterns without regularly testing the market
- Spending significant staff time on processes that could be simplified or better planned

The result is not just financial inefficiency. It is opportunity cost — time, budget and leadership attention that could have been redirected towards teaching, support or school improvement.

In 2026, this approach is becoming increasingly difficult to justify.

Procurement as a Leadership Issue

The shift we are seeing across the sector is clear: procurement is moving from an operational task to a strategic one.

School leaders and governors are increasingly recognising that how a school buys has a direct bearing on:

- Financial sustainability
- Operational resilience

- The quality of education and support it can offer

This is why treating procurement as “just admin” is no longer viable. It requires the same level of strategic thinking that schools apply to curriculum, staffing, and improvement planning.

The good news is that the tools and opportunities to do this better now exist. The Procurement Act 2023 has introduced greater flexibility, transparency and scope for schools to engage the market more actively. But legislation alone does not create better buying — schools need practical confidence, clear processes, and a willingness to move beyond default approaches.

That is exactly what this series will help you build.

What Comes Next

Over the coming weeks, **The School Buying Reset 2026** will guide you through a clear and practical journey.

Each part will build on the last, moving from the case for change to the practical steps schools can take:

- Part 2 will explain what the Procurement Act 2023 really changes for schools and trusts
- Part 3 will examine the hidden costs of over-relying on frameworks
- Part 4 will provide a practical playbook for safely opening up competition
- Part 5 will explore where wider-market buying can deliver the biggest impact
- Part 6 will show how to build lasting procurement confidence year after year

Join The School Network

If you want to follow the full series and receive practical tools, templates and additional resources as each part is published, 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.