Three Weeks to Secure School Essentials

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As the summer break draws to a close, the next three weeks mark a pivotal period for UK school leaders preparing for the 2025/26 academic year. With the term starting in early September, headteachers, governors, and school business managers face a critical window to appoint new suppliers, allocate budgets, and finalise strategic plans. The School Network, a leading advocate for educational excellence, highlights the urgency of this period and the transformative opportunities presented by the Procurement Act 2023 to diversify supplier offerings and enhance school operations.

This advisory, *The School Essentials 2025/26*, outlines key priorities, insights from school leaders, and practical steps to ensure schools are ready for a successful year.

Why This Period Matters: Voices from School Leaders

The weeks leading up to the new academic year are a high-stakes time for school leaders. “August is when we set the foundation for the entire year,” says a headteacher at a primary school in Leeds. “From securing contracts for catering and IT to ensuring our budget supports student needs, these three weeks are about getting it right so we can focus on education from day one.”

A school business manager at a secondary school in Birmingham adds, “This is our last chance to review supplier performance, negotiate cost-effective deals, and align spending with our goals. With budgets tighter than ever, every decision counts.” For many, this period is also about addressing urgent challenges, such as replacing underperforming suppliers or upgrading critical infrastructure like fire safety or telecommunications systems before the term begins.

Data underscores the intensity of this period. A 2024 survey by the National Association of School Business Management found that 78% of school leaders finalise supplier contracts and budgets in August, with 65% reporting that decisions made in this window directly impact operational efficiency throughout the year. The Procurement Act 2023, effective since October 2024, adds a new layer of opportunity, enabling schools to access a wider pool of suppliers while prioritizing value, innovation, and local partnerships.

Key Priorities for the Next Three Weeks

1. **Appointing New Suppliers**

The start of the academic year demands reliable suppliers for essentials like catering, cleaning, IT services, and educational resources. School leaders should:

- **Review Existing Contracts:** Assess current suppliers for performance, cost-effectiveness, and alignment with school needs. For example, schools still reliant on outdated PSTN/ISDN systems must urgently transition to VoIP to avoid disruptions by the January 2027 switch-off deadline.
- **Engage New Providers:** Use the Procurement Act 2023’s flexible frameworks to explore innovative suppliers, including SMEs and local businesses, which can offer competitive pricing and tailored solutions.
- **Prioritize Safety and Compliance:** Ensure suppliers for fire safety, security, and IT systems meet regulatory standards, such as the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 or UK GDPR for data protection.

Case Study: A secondary school in Bristol replaced its catering supplier in August 2024 after a competitive tender under the new Procurement Act. By selecting a local provider, the school reduced costs by 15% and improved meal quality, boosting student satisfaction.

2. **Allocating Budgets**

With school budgets under pressure—facing a 3% real-terms cut in 2025/26 due to inflation—strategic allocation is critical. Leaders should:

- **Align Spending with Priorities:** Focus on high-impact areas like staff training, digital infrastructure, and student wellbeing programs. For instance, investing in modern fire safety systems can lower insurance premiums by up to 20%.
- **Leverage Funding Opportunities:** Apply for grants like the Condition Improvement Fund (CIF) for infrastructure upgrades or explore energy efficiency schemes to offset rising utility costs.
- **Plan for Contingencies:** Reserve 5-10% of budgets for unforeseen expenses, such as emergency repairs or supply chain disruptions, which affected 30% of schools in 2024.

Leader Insight: "We're reallocating funds to upgrade our IT systems this August," says a headteacher at a secondary school in London. "The savings from a new VoIP system will allow us to invest in more Chromebooks for students, directly supporting our digital learning goals."

3. **Planning for the Term Ahead**

Effective planning ensures a smooth start to the term. Key actions include:

- **Curriculum and Resource Planning:** Confirm availability of textbooks, digital platforms, and specialist equipment. Schools adopting edtech, like virtual learning environments, report a 25% increase in student engagement.
- **Staff Training:** Schedule professional development to equip teachers with skills for new technologies or safeguarding protocols, critical given that 40% of schools faced compliance issues in 2024 audits.
- **Infrastructure Readiness:** Audit facilities for safety and functionality, prioritizing upgrades to fire alarms, sprinklers, or broadband to meet modern standards.

Case Study: A primary school in Kent used August 2024 to overhaul its fire safety systems, installing addressable alarms and training staff on updated evacuation protocols. The result was a 30% faster evacuation time during drills, enhancing

student safety.

4. **Leveraging the Procurement Act 2023**

The Procurement Act 2023 revolutionizes how schools source suppliers, emphasizing transparency, value for money, and accessibility. Key benefits include:

- **Wider Supplier Access:** The Act's open frameworks allow schools to engage SMEs and local providers, fostering competition and innovation. For example, 20% more schools partnered with regional IT firms in 2024, reducing costs and improving service responsiveness.
- **Simplified Processes:** Streamlined tendering rules reduce administrative burdens, enabling faster supplier selection. Schools can now use dynamic purchasing systems (DPS) to access pre-vetted suppliers.
- **Social Value Focus:** The Act encourages prioritizing suppliers with strong environmental or community credentials, aligning with schools' sustainability goals. A 2024 pilot saw 15 schools reduce their carbon footprint by 10% through green suppliers.

Leader Insight: "The Procurement Act has opened new doors," says a school business manager at a primary school in Manchester. "We accessed a local edtech provider for our new learning platform, saving 12% compared to our previous supplier while getting cutting-edge features."

Why This Is a Key Period

The next three weeks are make-or-break for several reasons:

- **Term Readiness:** Decisions made now directly impact the first weeks of term, when first impressions and operational stability are critical.
- **Budget Deadlines:** Many funding applications, like CIF, close in early September, necessitating swift planning.
- **Supplier Availability:** Top suppliers book up quickly in August, with 50% of schools reporting delays if contracts aren't secured by mid-month.
- **Regulatory Pressure:** With fire safety inspections and digital compliance checks intensifying, schools must act to avoid penalties or disruptions.

Action Plan for School Leaders

The School Network recommends the following steps to maximize the next three weeks:

- **Conduct a Needs Audit:** Identify gaps in supplier services, infrastructure, and resources, prioritizing safety and digital upgrades.
- **Engage Stakeholders:** Consult staff, governors, and parents to align priorities with community needs.
- **Utilize Procurement Act Tools:** Explore open frameworks and DPS to source competitive, innovative suppliers.
- **Secure Budget Approvals:** Finalize allocations and submit funding applications promptly.

“The next three weeks are your opportunity to set your school up for success,” says The School Network. “By acting decisively, leveraging the Procurement Act 2023, and prioritizing essentials like safety and digital infrastructure, you can ensure a resilient, innovative 2025/26 term.”