

Price vs. purpose:

How schools can
purchase responsibly
despite cost pressures

amazon business



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Executive summary

A gulf between words and actions

Amazon Business research reveals a gulf between words and actions in the education sector: ethical and sustainable procurement is reportedly a top priority, but rising costs, supplier issues and weak spend controls routinely prevent schools from making more responsible choices.

Education organisations recognise the economic and reputational risks of irresponsible buying – and they're willing to adopt more responsible practices against a backdrop of rising financial and ESG scrutiny. But our research with 155 education sector procurement professionals across the UK, France, Germany, Italy and Spain suggests that education institutions are overstating their ESG (ethical, social and governance) commitments and prioritising short-term financial needs over long-term value creation.

The research findings suggest that:

1.



Education is falling short of ESG expectations:

most education buyers (81%) admit their organisation could be doing more to prioritise responsible procurement. More than two thirds (68%) say responsible practices are not as important to the organisation as their external positioning suggests, while 80% say they would find procurement more rewarding if they could contribute more to achieving ESG goals.

2.



Short-term financial priorities dominate spending:

most say cost cutting is a higher priority than responsible procurement (79%) and financial health determines an organisation's focus on responsible buying (78%). Education buyers say ethical and sustainable purchasing is becoming more expensive in the short term (77%).

3.



Buyers recognise the risks of prioritising price over purpose:

most say focusing on lowest-price goods can increase long-term costs (75%) and lead to unethical practices (77%), exposing their organisation to costly risks.

4.



Cost and supplier issues prevent adoption of responsible procurement:

the cost (real or perceived) associated with ethical and sustainable purchasing is the top barrier to adopting more responsible procurement practices; a lack of suppliers that meet responsible procurement requirements is the second.

5.



Legacy tech compounds spend control issues:

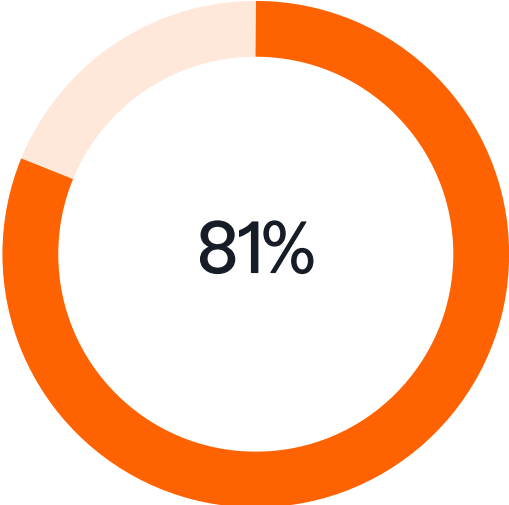
only 37% of education organisations use a single purchasing platform for the organisation's tail spend. One third of buyers say improving visibility and control over off-tender buying is a top-three priority in the next 12 months.

Key research findings

With additional insights from Professor Jens Roehrich and Dr Christoph Schmidt (University of Bath, UK), this report explores the findings in full and outlines some of the steps education organisations can take to mitigate risks, improve spend control and embed more responsible practices.

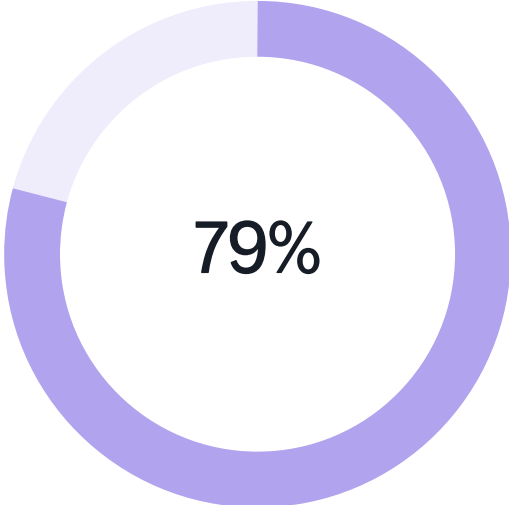
81%

say their organisation should be doing more to prioritise responsible procurement



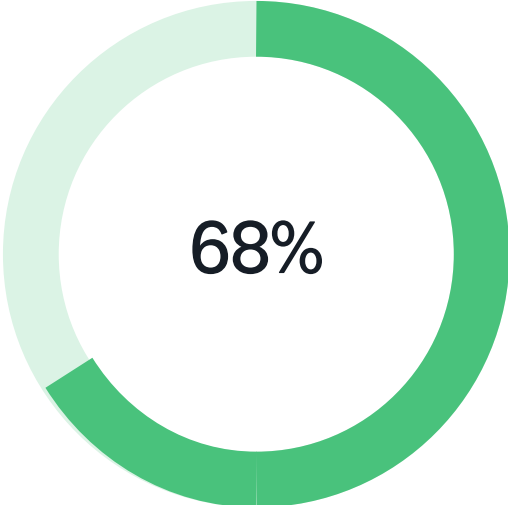
79%

say chasing lowest price can increase long-term costs, creating a false economy



68%

say their organisation overstates its commitment to responsible procurement



Introduction: a conflict of short- vs. long-term value

Most education buyers (79%) say their organisation is prioritising immediate cost-cutting measures over responsible procurement. What's the long-term cost of this short-term thinking?

Schools in the UK and Europe face a perfect storm of financial pressures. Inflation is making everyday purchases less affordable, budgets and revenue are down in real terms and financial scrutiny has never been higher. Schools must make tough calls to balance the books.

At the same time, there's rising pressure – from policy makers and public perception alike – to prove they're demonstrating long-term value and responsibility in economic, environmental and social areas. Often, these imperatives are in direct conflict, and something's got to give.

So does cost cutting mean corner cutting? Are cost pressures pushing ethical and sustainable purchasing down the agenda? And what's at stake if schools prioritise cost cutting at the expense of responsible practices?

This report unpacks these urgent questions, harnessing original research with procurement decision-makers across the UK and Europe, and expert analysts to investigate:



Why schools are struggling to prioritise responsible procurement amid ongoing cost pressures



The reasons and risks behind a price vs. purpose conflict



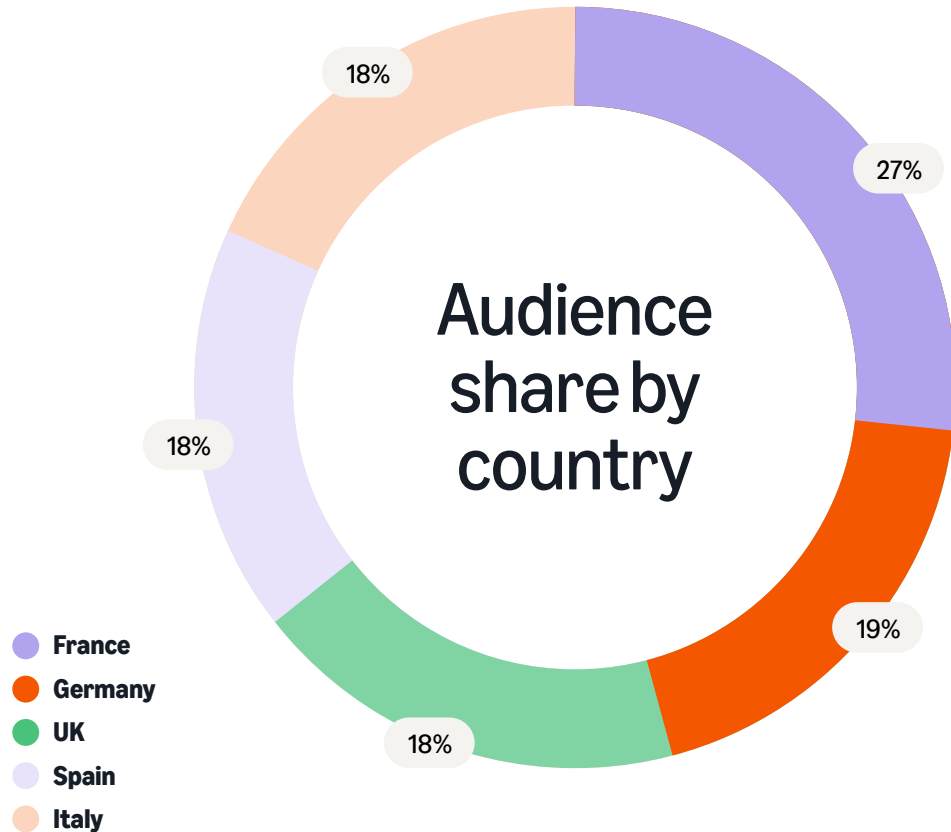
The strategies and tools leaders can use to balance spending efficiency and responsible practices and turn off-tender purchasing into a force for positive change

Overall, there's a growing expectation that school budgets balance the books but also deliver on wider objectives such as sustainability, inclusion and equity. The result is that procurement decision-makers must navigate both immediate financial constraints and longer-term policy ambitions."

Professor Jens Roehrich (University of Bath, UK)

Our research methodology

This report draws on insights from a July 2025 online survey of 155 education procurement professionals across the UK, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, and broader research with 439 public sector professionals in education, local government and non-profits throughout Europe.



With insights from:



Dr Christoph Schmidt,
University of Bath

Christoph Schmidt is an Associate Professor of Empirical Supply Chain Management at the University of Bath, UK. His research focuses on the use of digital technologies in operations and supply chain management, including the examination of sustainability aspects in public and private procurement settings.

Christoph's research has been published in academic journals, reports and media outlets, and has won awards at international conferences. His research has informed university teaching, executive education and industry engagement.



Professor Jens Roehrich,
University of Bath

Jens Roehrich is a Professor of Supply Chain Innovation at the University of Bath, School of Management, UK. He has carried out research, executive education, competence development and consultancy activities with a wide range of public and private organisations.

His research focuses on long-term relationships across public and private organisations with a particular emphasis on responsible public procurement and contracting. His award-winning research has been published in academic journals, industry and policy reports and in major media outlets.

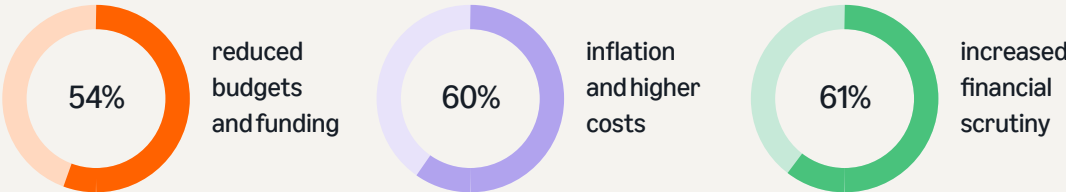
Cost and efficiency still dominate agendas

Over the next year, school procurement agendas will centre around the push for greater efficiency and tighter cost controls.

Our research shows that streamlining processes and cutting costs are top priorities for schools. It's easy to see why; with budgets under pressure, saving time and boosting efficiency can lead to tangible financial gains, helping schools and trusts stay ahead of rising costs. This trend is playing out across the public sector at large; making efficiency gains (41%) and reducing costs in purchasing (38%) are twin priorities dominating procurement agendas in the public sector.

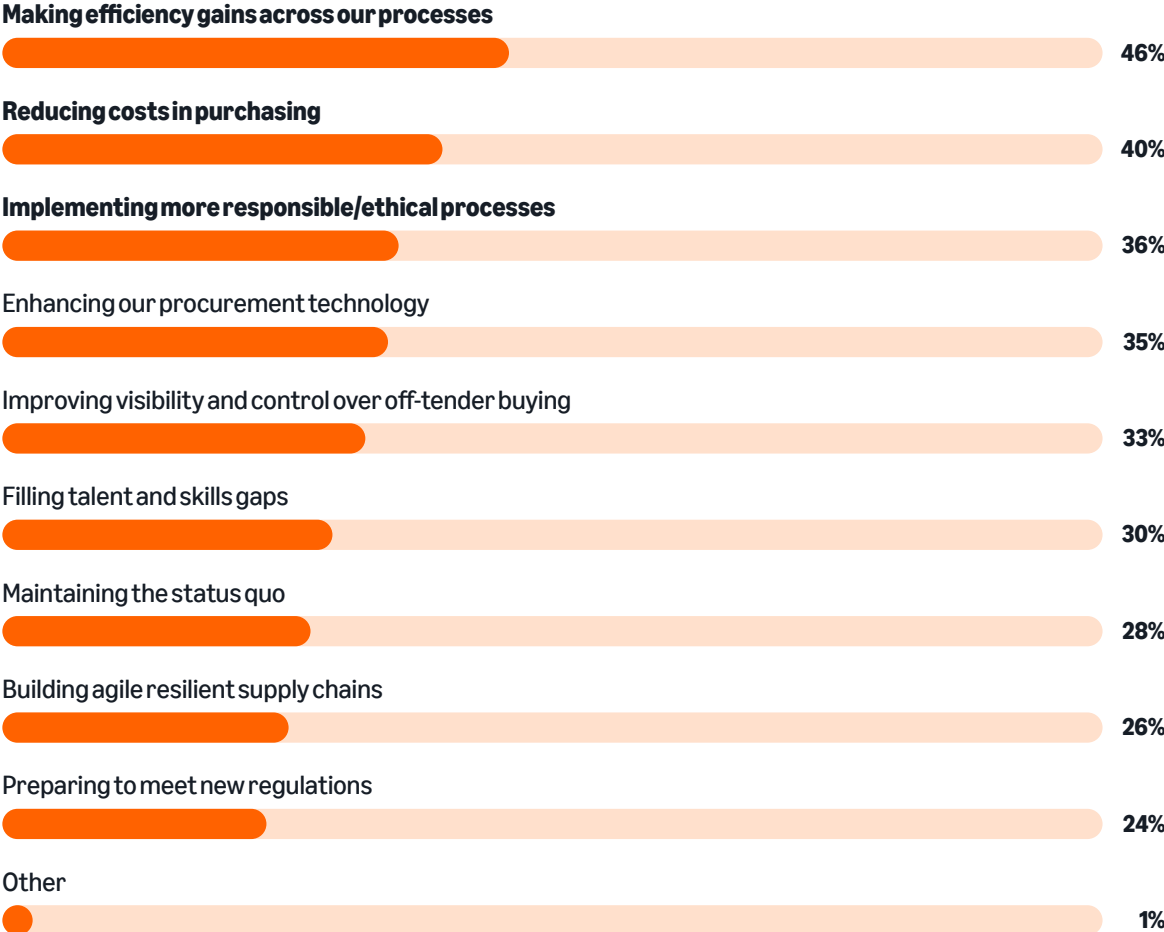
So what are the main pressures behind these cost-cutting drives? Most respondents say their off-tender purchasing is being affected by increased financial scrutiny (61%), inflation and higher costs (60%) and reduced budgets and funding (54%).

The cost pressures impacting participants' off-tender purchasing:



Education's top procurement priorities in the next 12 months

% of respondents who voted each option in their top 3 priorities for the year





Reduced funding and revenue

The surveyed countries report a funding squeeze, but this varies across markets. France, for example, has one of the highest levels of public expenditure on education relative to GDP while Italy allocates just 4.1% of its GDP to education, trailing the EU average of 4.8.² Government funding to public schools has not kept pace with rising costs like inflation and increases to teacher salaries, and balancing budgets remains one of the biggest concerns for school and trust leaders.³

Private schools are not immune from these cost pressures; tax exemptions on private school fees in the UK, for example, were removed in 2024, triggering a wave of mandatory fee hikes, enrolment decline and closures – especially among smaller or lower-margin institutions.⁴ National policy changes like this can have long-term consequences on revenue. For example, an independent survey of tens of thousands of parents across 150 UK private schools suggested that the introduction of VAT would result in 6.4% of children being withdrawn over the following four years.

Adding to the ongoing funding squeeze, birth rates across the surveyed countries are shrinking. In Italy, for instance, there were only 370,000 births in 2024, about 10,000 fewer than the previous year, making it one of the lowest in Europe (it also records a continuous year-on-year decline in births over a 10-year period). As many education systems allocate at least some funding on a per-pupil basis, falling enrolment directly reduces the funds schools receive.⁵ This impact is stronger in countries such as the UK and Italy, where per-pupil formulas dominate, compared to more centralised systems like France or Germany, where fixed allocations for staffing and infrastructure provide some cushioning. Nonetheless, across all systems, fewer pupils means balancing largely stable costs with decreasing funding.



Schools are under pressure from every direction – parents, policymakers, auditors – to deliver more with less. It’s no wonder short-term cost savings win out, even if the long-term costs quietly build.”

Dr Christoph Schmidt (University of Bath, UK)

1. [Educational expenditure statistics - Statistics Explained - Eurostat](https://www.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/en/statistics-explained/explained/educational-expenditure-statistics)
2. <https://www.arsenal.com/news/general-news/2023/09/06/education-spending-in-italy-well-below-eu-average-report-20230906-889f4d50-abdf-4f4a-013c3d1.html>
3. <https://www.inis.co.uk/blog/education/what-130-education-leaders-said-were-the-sectors-biggest-problems>

4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c033d6021ed0>
<https://www.bfa.org/2023/04/29/with-the-implementation-of-the-vat-policy-private-school-fees-can-increase-by-up-to-11300>
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/private-schools/vat-policy-labour-budget-k2638361.html>
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/01/changing-birthrate-threatens-italian-schools>



Inflation and higher costs

Inflation and rising costs exacerbate funding and budgetary restrictions. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimates that school costs will grow by 6.5% in 2025-26, outpacing the 5.8% increase in mainstream school funding per pupil in cash terms.⁶ Separate research shows that 76% of primary schools and 94% of secondary schools will not be able to afford their costs in 2025-26.⁷

A comparison of the surveyed countries shows the UK is experiencing the highest rates of inflation.⁸ In 2024, school funding per pupil rose just 3% in cash terms compared to 2010; adjusted for inflation, this translates to roughly 3% less purchasing power.⁹ A decade of continued austerity initiatives has seen new funding all but absorbed by relentless cost increases, putting unprecedented pressure on every pound spent. As a result, many maintained schools are looking to join Multi Academy Trusts to improve synergy and efficiency so they can survive financially. With this in mind, it's not surprising that reducing costs is an especially high priority for our UK public sector research participants.

On top of broad-based inflationary pressures, organisations across both public and private sectors are grappling with significant increases in structural and non-discretionary costs, particularly in areas such as energy, utilities and essential services. The impact is especially visible in sectors with limited ability to pass on costs, such as education and public administration. In the UK and Germany, for instance, schools and municipal facilities have reported double-digit percentage

“Local authorities warn that energy expenditure now consumes an ever-larger share of annual operating budgets, crowding out funds for core activities such as teaching, maintenance and staff development.”

Professor Jens Roehrich (University of Bath, UK)

increases in heating, electricity and other utility bills over recent years.¹⁰

Unlike more flexible categories of spend, these structural costs are difficult to reduce without undermining basic service delivery or regulatory compliance. This creates a persistent financial squeeze: even when headline inflation moderates, elevated utility prices and long-term supply constraints – driven by factors such as geopolitical tensions, carbon-transition policies and volatility in global energy markets – continue to erode financial headroom.

For procurement professionals, this environment demands more proactive strategies to safeguard budgets and maintain service quality. Examples include long-term energy contracting, buying less by managing demand (not just negotiating lower prices), deeper supplier collaboration and risk-sharing mechanisms where schools negotiate index-linked contracts to create a buffer against the volatile cost of energy, materials, inflation and supply chain disruption.



Increased financial scrutiny

Across Europe and the UK, schools are increasingly expected to justify spending decisions as governments and taxpayers increase their focus on value for money. Schools are being drawn into more stringent audit frameworks to ensure compliance with national and EU-level standards, and procurement inefficiencies have become a target.

In the UK, the Department for Education has rolled out tools such as the “Schools Financial Benchmarking” service to highlight where schools’ costs deviate from peers. Italy, like its counterparts, is grappling with the challenge of balancing cost efficiency with compliance. In Spain, regional governments now encourage consortia-style procurement across clusters of schools to reduce duplication and demonstrate efficient use of funds. These moves are designed to cut waste and ensure public funds stretch further.

Financial scrutiny is also tied to broader social and environmental policy aims. For example, French schools receiving subsidies for canteen reform must show that funds are spent on organic or locally sourced produce, while German state schools piloting carbon-neutral building projects are subject to close financial tracking to ensure green procurement targets are met.

Across the surveyed countries, declining revenues from shrinking pupil cohorts, inflation, rising structural costs and stricter oversight are together increasing cost pressures. In more decentralised systems such as the UK and Spain, fragmented responsibilities and short fiscal cycles increase volatility and expose schools more directly to funding swings. By contrast, France and Germany’s more centralised frameworks provide greater stability, but at the cost of heavier administrative and legal burdens that limit flexibility. Italy sits in between, with regional disparities and weaker local capacity creating uneven outcomes across the country.

The bottom line? Procurement decision-makers in education are having to do more with less – and prove they’re doing so. To achieve cost savings, they need to extract maximum value from limited budgets, negotiate the best supplier agreements and find ways to run procurement processes more efficiently.

While greater oversight improves accountability, it can also create false incentives. Scrutiny often emphasises short-term, easily measurable savings, reinforcing procurement-by-price decisions. This focus risks sidelining longer-term value factors such as sustainability or resilience, the benefits of which are harder to demonstrate in annual financial audit cycles.”

Dr Christoph Schmidt (University of Bath, UK)

How inefficiencies impact education buyers

Education buyers often share the same circular challenge: without better funding, it can be difficult to upgrade and improve processes. However, that means procurement processes remain as they are – inefficient and consequently requiring more time and funding. Very few education providers are big enough to have their own, highly skilled procurement team,

so tasks fall to overstretched administrators or even teaching staff. Procurement responsibilities may also be split between federal, state and local levels (particularly in Germany), leading to inefficiencies. This disperses responsibility, increases administrative workload and makes it harder to harness schools' collective buying power for better value.

Outdated, ad-hoc procurement processes tend to impact efficiency in a few key ways:

01

Sourcing:

reliance on outdated methods such as paper catalogues or fragmented supplier arrangements can mean procurement processes take longer. Meanwhile, without consolidated contracts or centralised methods of buying (such as via digital platforms), schools lack control and can end up paying more than necessary while exposing themselves to unauthorised, off-contract or non-compliant spending. Currently, digital procurement processes differ widely across the surveyed countries. In more centralised systems such as Italy, schools are required to use the national MEPA platform, ensuring some form of digital process. By contrast, in decentralised systems like Germany or the UK, responsibility sits with local authorities or schools themselves, leading to fragmented practices and uneven digital investment.

02

Back-office payment processes:

without a centralised platform, back-office payment processes – such as multiple invoices across different suppliers, tracking VAT and resolving errors – consume time that could otherwise be spent on value-adding activities. These inefficiencies can obscure the true cost of procurement, with “hidden” administrative burdens representing a significant portion of procurement teams' time.

03

Approval workflows:

weak or inconsistent approval workflows can undermine governance and compliance obligations. Where procurement policies are poorly defined or not aligned to public frameworks, staff are left chasing retrospective approvals or reworking documentation to satisfy audit requirements. This increases risk and erodes confidence in procurement as a team that can drive the institution and its strategy forward.

04

No procurement team:

a further challenge is the skills mismatch in many schools, where teaching staff are tasked with managing the complex procurement and compliance requirements “on the side,” without adequate training. This increases inefficiency in day-to-day operations, with staff spending time on procurement tasks instead of their core responsibilities. Targeted training programmes and the development of pooled procurement structures could help ease this burden yet are challenging to implement.

“Overall, day-to-day procurement in schools is hampered by fragmented responsibilities, outdated purchasing methods and inconsistent approval processes. These inefficiencies inflate costs, consume staff time and obscure the true value of procurement, leaving education buyers under constant pressure.”

Professor Jens Roehrich (University of Bath, UK)

Education procurement is still judged on short-term savings, while professionals want to make a long-term impact on social value and the environment. Bridging this disconnect could be a powerful lever for talent acquisition and retention in the sector.”

Dr Christoph Schmidt (University of Bath, UK)

Why responsible procurement is a top priority

Efficiency and optimisation aren't the only things on education buyers' minds; more than a third (36%) say implementing more responsible procurement processes is a top-three priority in the next 12 months.

So what's driving this focus on ethical and sustainable procurement across schools in the UK and Europe?

Purchasing with purpose

Our research suggests that values and ethics are key drivers for adopting more responsible procurement practices. Improving the organisation's environmental, ethical and social impact (46%) and aligning to the organisation's mission and purpose (46%) are key motives for moving towards more ethical and sustainable purchasing in education.

Procurement professionals also point towards strong buy-in for ESG from business leadership (43%). But it's not just the organisation's outlook that's important here; procurement decision-makers seem to be personally invested in ESG.



Most (86%) report feeling personally engaged and passionate about responsible purchasing, while 80% say that being able to contribute more towards ESG and responsible procurement goals would make their work more rewarding. With schools struggling to fill teacher training places¹¹ and almost a third of respondents (30%) reporting a need to prioritise talent and skills gaps, ESG could help attract and retain talent by instilling a sense of purpose.¹²

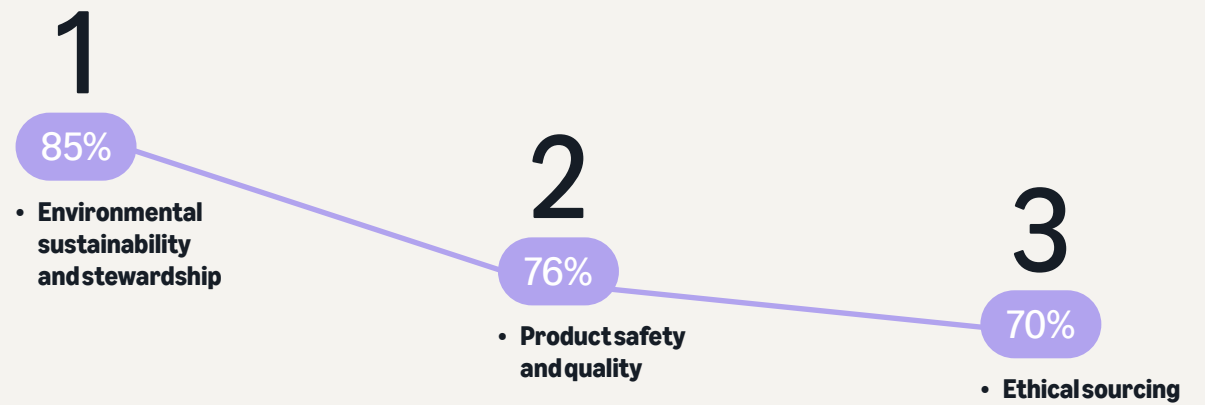
Education buyers feel engaged with ESG



The top three motives for adopting more responsible business buying



The three most important aspects of responsible procurement



¹¹ <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/just-half-of-secondary-teacher-recruitment-target-met/>
¹² <https://www.mckinsey.com/-/media/McKinsey/Business%20Functions/Strategy%20and%20Corporate%20Finance/Our%20Insights/Case%20Study%20that%20SG%20creates%20value/Five-ways-that-ESG-creates-value.pdf>

Examples of responsible procurement practices

Procurement framework and aggregated buying

Secondary schools increasingly rely on procurement frameworks that embed ethical and sustainability criteria. In the UK, the Department for Education endorses Crown Commercial Service frameworks to help schools access vetted, responsible suppliers. In Germany, “Schulverbünde” (school clusters) are used to consolidate procurement demands across schools, giving them collectively more leverage when requiring eco-certifications from vendors.

Embedding sustainability in energy procurement

Schools are also advancing sustainability through construction and energy-related procurement. In Italy, the “Antonio Brancati” secondary school in Pesaro was tendered as a nearly zero-energy building (LEED Platinum certified), using renewable energy systems and circular materials.¹³ In Spain, pilot schools in the ClimACT programme (Catalonia and Galicia) have introduced procurement policies to cut energy consumption through smart systems, insulation and renewable contracts.¹⁴ These examples show how sustainable infrastructure procurement not only reduces emissions but also generates long-term cost savings.

Ethical supply chains and everyday goods

Procurement decisions around everyday school goods also provide opportunities for embedding ethics and ESG values. In France’s Dordogne region, middle schools shifted food service contracts to local organic farmers, ensuring healthier meals and supporting the regional economy.¹⁵ In Spain, some municipalities, such as Carbonia, have introduced “zero km” sourcing requirements in catering contracts for secondary schools to lower environmental impact.¹⁶

Across the the UK and Europe, schools are actively testing a range of approaches to make procurement more socially and environmentally responsible, whether through centralised purchasing frameworks, sustainable building and refurbishment projects or the ethical sourcing of everyday goods such as food, furniture and learning materials.



¹³ https://green-forum.ec.europa.eu/green-business/green-public-procurement/good-practice-library/green-public-procurement-pesaro-school-enhancing-sustainability-educational-infrastructure_en
¹⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/projects/projects-database/helping-schools-become-energy-smart-in-south-west-europe-spain-portugal-france-and-uk_en

¹⁵ <https://sapiensnetwork.eu/case-study-organic-local-meals-dordogne-secondary-schools/>
¹⁶ <https://op.europa.eu/en/web/public-procurement/procurement-details/-/procurement/47bb7a0b-af52-493e-b569-f02921406095>



Pilot initiatives in areas like low-carbon construction, local supplier engagement, and circular-economy purchasing have already demonstrated measurable benefits, from reduced environmental footprints to stronger relationships with regional suppliers.

“The bigger challenge lies in turning isolated successes into standardised practices – and embedding them across entire education systems. Many schools still face barriers such as fragmented budgets, varying local regulations and limited internal expertise in sustainable procurement.”

Professor Jens Roehrich (University of Bath, UK)

As a result, responsibility is often treated as an add-on to traditional cost and quality criteria rather than a fully integrated decision-making principle. Moving from promising examples to consistent, system-wide adoption will require clearer policy guidance, shared measurement frameworks, and capacity building for procurement teams, ensuring that responsible purchasing is not only aspirational but becomes a routine, auditable element of every procurement decision.

Compliance matters, but is not the driving force

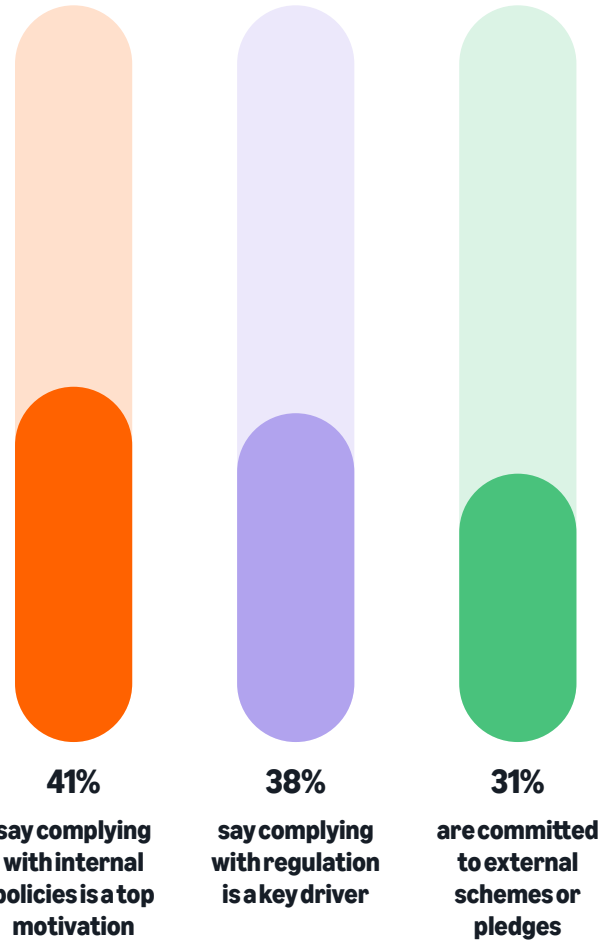
Over the last few years alone, European governments have introduced new legislation and frameworks designed to embed responsible practices into procurement across private and public organisations. These practices – such as measuring Scope 3 emissions, tackling modern slavery and baking ESG into contract award criteria – are increasingly expected and auditable under these guidelines.

European and UK responsible practice legislation

- UK Procurement Act
- National Procurement Policy Statement (NPPS)
- EU due-diligence law
- Circular Economy Act
- Sector consortia frameworks

Despite this, much of today's regulation is aimed at contracting authorities and the private companies that supply the education sector, rather than education institutions themselves. This is perhaps the reason why education organisations report compliance as relevant but not the top reason for adopting more responsible practices. This picture may change as education procurement becomes an increasingly regulated space.

Compliance drivers for implementing responsible procurement practices:



The rising risk of non-compliance

Navigating this mix of national and EU regulations can be daunting, especially for smaller institutions. But there are good incentives for complying with responsible buying regulations that go beyond box-ticking. When sustainability or social criteria are overlooked, the short-term savings often mask deeper vulnerabilities. Low-quality goods may fail sooner, forcing schools into emergency purchases at premium prices and disrupting teaching environments. Over time, this erodes budgets by raising the total cost of ownership (TCO) and preventing schools from capturing value across the full lifecycle of assets.

“Procurement in education is rarely a simple choice. Competing demands often make the cheapest option look like the safest one, but in the long run, it can be the most expensive mistake.”

Dr Christoph Schmidt, University of Bath

As procurement laws widen in scope, non-compliance could bring legal challenges, stricter audits or loss of access to funding streams. Just as serious is the reputational damage that can follow ethical lapses, which can draw public backlash and undermine trust in school leadership.

How regulatory pressures vary by market

France

The Public Procurement Code (Code de la Commande Publique) requires schools to include environmental considerations in procurement decisions.

Spain

Aligning with the Green Public Procurement Plan requires schools to adopt eco-friendly practices, which can be resource-intensive. Engaging with local suppliers to meet sustainability criteria can foster community ties and reduce costs.

UK

Schools must align to the UK Procurement Act 2023 and education-specific guidelines including YPO (Yorkshire Purchasing Organisation). Adopting frameworks like DfE-approved contracts (Department for Education) can streamline purchasing while ensuring compliance.

Germany

Schools must comply with the Circular Economy Act (KrWG) and other green procurement laws. Embedding ESG criteria into procurement strategies and adopting digital purchasing platforms can improve compliance and streamline supplier selection.

Italy

Schools must adhere to the Criteri Ambientali Minimi (CAM), which sets minimum green criteria for procurement. Aligning with CAM requirements can unlock funding and support from government initiatives.

From Amazon Business' research, we can see that education organisations are motivated by a combination of forces. While compliance is a factor, it's important to note that most education organisations also feel motivated by a strong sense of ethics. For this sector, responsible buying isn't simply a box-ticking exercise, it's something that organisations feel emotionally drawn to, hoping to shift the dial on improving their environment, ethical and social impact.



The cost vs. conscience debate

School procurement teams are motivated to buy responsibly, but in the battle between cost and ethics, cost is winning.

Even though 87% say they're meeting or exceeding responsible procurement goals, decision-makers admit it's tough to keep those goals front and centre when budgets are tight. When it comes down to it, cost-cutting often trumps ESG priorities.

Short-term financial priorities dominate

Given the harsh economic realities facing education, it's perhaps unsurprising that 79% of procurement professionals say cost-cutting takes priority over responsible purchasing, and 78% say the financial health of the organisation determines how much importance is placed on responsible procurement.

For some, responsible purchasing does not feel financially feasible. In fact, "added costs (real or perceived)" is rated the top barrier to adopting more responsible practices. Publicly funded schools facing tough budget cuts, for example, are less likely to see responsible purchasing as affordable or critical to their core education mission.

Short-term cost optimisation takes priority over ESG



79%

of decision-makers say cost-cutting takes priority over responsible purchasing



78%

say fiscal health determines the importance placed on responsible procurement



77%

agree responsible procurement is becoming more expensive and less financially feasible

79%

agree business leaders
give mixed messages
on procurement priorities

68%

say responsible practices
are not as important to
the organisation as their
external messaging or
positioning suggests

The result: a gap between ambition and reality

Short-term cost pressures and long-term ESG goals don't always align and this is causing some internal tension. Many education buyers feel leadership sends mixed signals (79%), and procurement leaders report a noticeable disconnect between what their organisations say publicly about ESG commitments and what's happening day-to-day (68%).

Ultimately, despite procurement leaders saying both they and their organisations want to improve on their responsible purchasing, short-term pressures prevent schools from making real progress on their longer-term environmental and social goals.



The risks of deprioritising responsible procurement

Procurement leaders in education are clear that, for now, cost-cutting must take precedence over sustainable buying. At the same time, they're aware this decision poses significant risks.

The majority (75%) recognise that chasing the lowest price can ultimately increase costs; cheaper typically means lower quality, and lower quality goods need replacing more often. There are other risks too: 77% agree focusing too heavily on lowest cost can lead to unethical practices – something that could ultimately become a reputational risk or incur non-compliance fines.

Fiscal pressures can certainly disincentivise organisations from engaging with ESG more rigorously in procurement processes, but it's not the only hurdle standing in the way of more sustainable practices; education organisations are also contending with more practical hurdles to implementation.



Ultimately, there's a big conundrum at work; education institutions acknowledge that buying cheap can be a false economy but they feel unable to prioritise longer-term goals in the face of short-term financial pressure."

Professor Jens Roehrich, University of Bath





Practical implementation hurdles

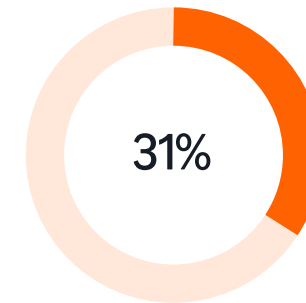
Supplier limitations: reduced choice and missing data

Sourcing is a significant barrier to responsible procurement practices. In fact, education buyers say the second most significant barrier to adopting more responsible practices is the struggle to find suppliers that meet their requirements. Meanwhile, a quarter (26%) say it's challenging to get the right information to qualify potential suppliers in the first place.

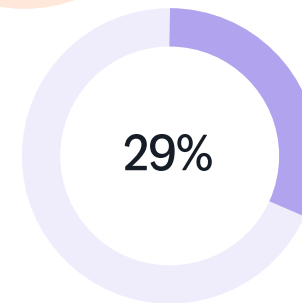
When education organisations do get further in their responsible procurement, supplier challenges crop up again. Nearly a third (29%) say it's harder to negotiate competitive pricing or terms, while 27% struggle to consolidate the number of suppliers they work with. With these additional hurdles, it's no surprise that procurement leaders voted "slower, more complex procurement processes" as the biggest issue with implementing responsible procurement.

These supplier constraints raise a tricky question: how can education buyers make the most responsible choice if it means narrowing their sourcing options – often at the expense of competitive pricing? What's more, working closely with suppliers to obtain accurate and transparent information about their practices requires significant time and effort, making it harder to align purchasing decisions with long-term ESG goals.

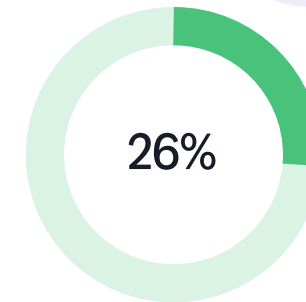
Supplier limitations hamper responsible procurement



say difficulty sourcing suppliers is making it harder to adopt responsible practices



say responsible practices make it harder to negotiate competitive pricing or terms



say sourcing ESG information is a challenge to adopting better practices

Spend control and visibility barriers

Uncontrolled off-tender purchasing is another hurdle slowing down progress on responsible procurement in education. 30% of procurement leaders say they lack control over this type of purchasing, making it harder to embed sustainable practices. So it's no surprise that improving visibility and control around off-tender buying emerged as a top priority for the year ahead.

Without a clear understanding of what they're spending across different categories and suppliers, schools will struggle to:



Understand if everyone is purchasing compliantly and where controls are needed



Identify improvement areas – for example, cost optimisation opportunities and higher-quality alternatives



Negotiate with suppliers and consolidate spend; understanding existing spend is key to evaluating suppliers and driving effective tender



Recover cost savings that can be reinvested to support the school's core mission and improve education quality

Improving visibility and control around off-tender buying emerged as a top priority for the year ahead

One of the greatest opportunities here is updating traditional procurement systems and processes. For example, just 37% of procurement decision-makers say purchases must be made through a single platform at their organisation. Without this oversight and control over employee spend, costs can spiral, and sustainability criteria can be extremely difficult to enforce.

So how are education organisations tracking their responsible procurement progress? Our research confirms many are relying on manual, document-based mandates to promote ethical and sustainable purchasing. With these processes, responsibility sits with procurement which can place additional burden on teams. In fact, 31% cite struggles with slower or more complex procurement after implementing responsible procurement practices. These legacy issues aren't just an efficiency and cost issue; they make it extremely hard for teams to enforce responsible behaviours and drive organisation-wide change.

Currently, the vast majority of education organisations (63%) don't yet use a best-practice single platform for organisational tail spend, and less than a third have attempted initial methods to scrutinise purchasing such as retrospective self-auditing or re-training.



30%

say a lack of control around off-tender purchasing makes it harder to adopt responsible practices

Maturity index of responsible purchasing enforcement

 **Informal, unenforceable methods**

34% have informal/non-enforced limitations on source location/shipping distance (e.g. shared via internal docs, word of mouth)

29% have preferred supplier lists but keep them in Excel or a similar application

 **Intermediate methods adopted**

30% have run staff training and awareness campaigns for responsible procurement

28% do self-auditing and regular reviews of off-tender purchases

 **Best practice**

37% say their organisation has a unified purchasing platform for greater spend control and visibility

The results highlight some of the issues education organisations have in implementing ESG. Beyond initial barriers around the affordability of ESG, many schools still don't feel kitted out to implement, enforce and track responsible procurement values. Without a digital platform in place where tail-spend purchasing can be seen and managed, instilling responsible purchasing is left up to busy staff to enforce. As a result, many are relying on good faith, word of mouth, and the circulation of documents they hope are read by staff.



How to balance price and purpose

So how can schools – juggling tight budgets, outdated systems and shifting priorities – move towards procurement that’s both cost-efficient and responsible?

It starts with a joined-up approach that connects strategy, people, processes and platforms. Our research shows many education leaders are already on board with ESG goals, but the key is to clearly define and communicate those priorities across the organisation. That way, everyone understands how their purchasing decisions support the bigger picture. Here are a few things to keep in mind:



Strategy

- **Define your purchasing criteria:** a good place to start is to align your responsible purchasing specifications with recognised criteria such as EU Green Public Procurement. Look to embed this into your procurement strategy alongside cost and quality requirements. Having well-defined, pre-approved criteria is one of the most effective ways to help your colleagues make compliant and responsible decisions faster.
- **Buy based on common interests:** joint procurement consortia or centralised hubs allow schools to pool demand, secure better deals, and work with pre-qualified suppliers who already meet standards.



People

- **Build employee awareness:** look for training opportunities for budget holders, so frontline staff can make informed decisions that consider value for money and ESG outcomes. Training on ISO 20400 sustainable procurement can be especially helpful. Share resources and checklists that help colleagues make compliant buying decisions, from playbooks to pre-approved award criteria. Here at Amazon Business, we're connecting peers in education and school trusts through events and networking opportunities to share best practices and pool resources.



Processes

- **Embed frameworks:** look to introduce framework agreements with preferred suppliers who meet both cost and ESG standards. This can help you cut administrative overheads while ensuring responsible sourcing. Harnessing frameworks like DfE-approved contracts can streamline purchasing while ensuring compliance.
- **Apply lifecycle costing:** take advantage of tools that help you calculate total cost of ownership, factoring in areas like energy efficiency, durability and disposal costs to justify sustainable choices. This can help to prevent "cheap now, costly later" purchasing.





Strengthen supply chain partnerships

- **Mandatory contractual clauses:** integrate clear social and environmental metrics, KPIs and enforcement rights for cases of contractual breaches to ensure that goods and services delivered to schools and universities meet required standards.
- **Reporting and certifications:** require regular reporting and, where appropriate, third-party certifications, supported by digital traceability tools for higher-risk categories.
- **Supplier reviews:** establish structured reviews with both incentives (e.g., recognition schemes for high-performing suppliers) and proportionate sanctions (remediation before termination) to maintain continuity of supply while encouraging improvements.
- **Market engagement and supplier development:** foster long-term partnerships by offering supplier development programmes, which can help local SMEs and social enterprises adapt to the specific needs of the education sector.
- **Phased procurement approaches:** responsible purchasing criteria don't have to be introduced all at once, but can be rolled out in phases. For example, by introducing a set of criteria across different product or service groups sequentially. Apply social value weighting to support smaller or mission-driven suppliers. However, this should be done with consistency: within a given product or service group, all suppliers should be evaluated using the same criteria, so that the process remains fair.



Platform

Build a case for investing in an organisation-wide digital procurement platform. Look for a platform that enforces your responsible procurement criteria for you, taking the pressure off procurement colleagues.

- **Use mechanisms like automatic filters** so it's easy to apply controls and only use approved suppliers and contracts that meet your ESG requirements and budget needs. This helps steer employee behaviours in a natural way so shopping with your organisation's values becomes second nature.
- **Harness built-in supplier scoring tools** to compare vendors on price, sustainability and compliance metrics, making it easier to assess fluctuating priorities. Digital contract management tools make it simpler to track KPIs, supplier reporting and audits, turning compliance into a source of insight and continuous improvement.
- **Implement spend analytics** to identify any "maverick" purchasing and redirect spend towards vetted suppliers aligned to the organisation's priorities. Spend visibility is key to understanding where cost and ESG vulnerabilities lie and the impact they may have on the wider business. Data analytics can provide a major advantage here, helping colleagues analyse purchasing decisions from the ground up.





How can AI help improve spend control and compliance?

Modern digital procurement software may have AI capabilities built in, providing even more advantages to education organisations in terms of implementing smarter spend control, transparency and compliance:

Smarter spend control

- By analysing purchasing behaviours, AI helps schools proactively detect anomalies in spend patterns, flagging potential issues before they arise
- Manual oversight is reduced, enabling business administrators to make smarter, data-driven decisions
- Real-time dashboards and predictive insights support budget optimisation, track off-contract spending, and ensure purchases align with financial policies
- AI-enhanced technology also facilitates bulk ordering and business-specific pricing, helping schools maximise value while maintaining procurement control

Streamlined compliance and ESG alignment

- Intelligent automation supports compliance through approval workflows, guided buying and smart filters that align with ESG goals and internal mandates
- Schools can automatically prioritise products with verified sustainability credentials or local sourcing attributes, contributing to net-zero targets and reduced carbon footprints
- These controls simplify compliance and reduce the administrative burden for education buyers navigating evolving ESG requirements
- AI also promotes supplier diversity by identifying small and local businesses, reinforcing ethical sourcing and community engagement
- Automated record-keeping and traceability make it easier, especially for smaller education providers, to demonstrate compliance to regulators, auditors and the public

Greater transparency of off-tender spend

- During onboarding, AI automates key setup tasks such as bulk user uploads, delivery address imports and intelligent mapping of UNSPSC codes
- AI can provide ongoing value by managing invoice remittance, improving data quality and generating detailed spend analytics

AI in education procurement promises more than efficiency gains; it strengthens risk detection, ensures due diligence, enhances audit readiness and reduces the hidden costs of non-compliance.



The schools and trusts leading the charge

Academy advances ESG goals through smarter procurement

Vision Multi Academy Trust, serving over 1,200 children in the UK, is committed to equitable education and responsible operations. To align procurement with their sustainability and compliance goals, the Trust turned to Amazon Business – not just to streamline purchasing, but to embed more ethical and efficient practices across their schools.

Implementing Pay by Invoice allowed the Trust to start using digital approvals, consolidate invoicing and centralise account management. This shift eliminated manual credit card processes and reduced administrative overheads, saving the finance team up to 30 minutes daily – time that’s been redirected towards more strategic initiatives.

Crucially, Amazon Business Analytics gave the Trust visibility into spend patterns, allowing them to prioritise preferred suppliers that support ESG criteria, including sustainability and net-zero targets. This empowers buyers to make more responsible choices without compromising speed or cost-efficiency.

With future plans for bulk purchasing of student tech accessories, the Trust continues to explore how Amazon Business can help them scale impact responsibly.

It’s not just about the bottom line and cash savings; it’s the time savings, efficiency and improved sustainability.”

Darren Cosgrove, CFO, Vision Multi Academy Trust

It's an obvious time-saver and has simplified the process completely."

Michelle Curtis, Senior Finance Officer,
Unity Schools Partnership



School trust advances responsible procurement with Amazon

Unity Schools Partnership, a trust of 39 UK schools, transformed its procurement operations by adopting Amazon Business to improve efficiency, cost control and sustainability.

The trust was struggling with fragmented purchasing processes, limited visibility of spend and heavy reliance on corporate cards. This made financial oversight extremely difficult and diverted precious time away from education priorities.

By integrating Amazon Business with their existing IRIS financial system, Unity Schools Partnership introduced a centralised, streamlined procurement model. Key features included Pay by Invoice, Business Prime and Spend Visibility, introducing better cost management and data-driven decision-making.

To promote responsible purchasing, the trust implemented Guided Buying, prioritising local sellers and sustainable delivery options. Domain controls were also introduced to prevent off-platform spending, reinforcing accountability.

The result? Significant time savings, reduced administrative burden and improved financial governance. Teachers gained faster access to classroom essentials while the trust advanced its commitment to responsible procurement and strategic resource allocation. Unity Schools Partnership is now positioned to scale its procurement strategy, using data insights to further optimise spend and support its educational mission.

Closing remarks: the untapped potential of off-tender purchasing

Cost pressures and process complexity are preventing schools from adopting more responsible practices. Schools want to purchase in a more responsible way, but short-term financial priorities – and the perception that responsibility comes at a premium – make it hard to balance cost and conscience.

The challenge, then, is not a lack of will, but a need to overcome short-termism and outdated systems. By investing in technology that bakes ESG criteria into off-tender purchasing and optimises spend control and visibility, schools can meet rising demand for responsible buying – from procurement professionals, business leaders, sector bodies, and more.

Despite ongoing cost pressures, education teams can implement smarter processes and the right technology to transform procurement from a box-ticking exercise to a strategic function that creates long-term economic, social and environmental value.





Amazon Business for education

Amazon Business is uniquely positioned to help schools optimise costs while advancing responsible purchasing.

We're working to simplify complex procurement processes by helping organisations track off-tender spending, manage invoices more easily and find sellers who align with their business goals and values. Together with our customers, we're laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and equitable business ecosystem.

Here are a few of the ways the Amazon Business marketplace makes responsible purchasing easier by connecting buyers to diverse, sustainable and local sellers and making it easier to align procurement with institutional values and ESG goals:

- **Guided Buying** lets schools align purchases with their environmental goals, allowing procurement leaders to set company-wide responsible purchasing criteria and preferences for eco-friendly products, sustainable suppliers and certified green businesses. Smart controls, multiple filters and visual signposting make responsible decision-making a natural part of procurement processes, taking the guesswork out of compliance.
- **Climate Pledge Friendly** makes it easy for schools to identify and purchase more sustainable products. This functionality highlights items that meet trusted third-party sustainability certifications, helping schools reduce their environmental impact without compromising on quality.

- **Buy Local** makes it easy to find and purchase from local sellers, helping to reduce shipping distances and associated carbon emissions while also strengthening community ties and supporting regional economic growth.

At the same time, the programme ensures visibility and control over off-tender spending, helping teams manage spend effectively while meeting clearly-defined ESG criteria:

- **Competitive pricing & spend control** brings transparency and control to spending, with business-specific pricing, approval workflows and enhanced reporting. This empowers teams to maximise budgets and ensure compliance, regardless of organisational size.
- **Data analytics** enhance decision-making, provide actionable insights into purchasing behaviours and supplier performance, and help teams anticipate evolving needs in a dynamic environment.
- **Detailed reporting and VAT-friendly invoicing** enhance auditability and accountability across the entire organisation. Compliance can also be ensured on off-contract spend through the Amazon Business YPO framework, giving schools peace of mind in their purchasing practices.
- **Bulk Ordering** allows schools to secure essential supplies at reduced cost-per-item, optimising spending through access to business pricing and quantity discounts on a wide range of products scheduled for maximum efficiency.



Make responsible buying second nature

With Amazon Business, you can save time searching, guide buyers and measure progress against internal ESG goals and regulatory measures.



Save time searching

Purchase products that meet your responsible purchasing requirements, comparing preferred products across criteria.



Guide your buyers

Make it easy for buyers to find and purchase preferred products, while balancing price and delivery speed.



Measure progress

Show progress toward your goals with simplified reporting that can be filtered by location and certifications.

To learn more, visit <https://business.amazon.com/en/solutions/responsible-purchasing>

Learn more

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