

Why K-12 Schools Aren't Buying From You

And what you can do about it

Lessons for navigating your education business through the most cautious K-12 market in years.

Sprint Education 



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ABOUT US

Sprint Education...

Is an award-winning agency that has pioneered marketing to education since 2007.

We create over 48 million teacher connections for our clients every year through delightful digital marketing plans and our education marketing and sales software (Campus) that attracts teachers, school staff, and educational establishments to our clients' brands.

This report was written by Guy.

"I co-founded Sprint Education back in 2007, and since then I've learnt so much about our industry and the inner-workings of communicating with the education sector. Many of you will know that I was once a teacher myself, and so know all about the pitfalls education businesses must avoid when it comes to choosing an education agency to manage their marketing. This is going to become even more important in light of this difficult time.

I've written this report to help explain why the industry is where it is and importantly what you can do to come out on top this year."



Guy Lewis
Co-Founder – Sprint Education



EDUCATION PURCHASING IN THE US HASN'T STOPPED . . .

It's evolved!

K-12 schools across the United States are still spending, but they're doing so with extreme scrutiny. The pandemic may be behind us, but its economic ripples, federal funding cliffs, staff shortages, and sociopolitical polarization have created one of the most cautious purchasing environments in decades.

You may have noticed:

- Fewer responses to outreach
- Longer buying cycles
- "Use-it-or-lose-it" budgets expiring without action
- Districts deferring even essential tech upgrades

But here's the truth...

Schools are still spending, but now they're being incredibly selective about what gets the green light.



Schools are spending – they're just more selective

Schools are hesitating and many have simply stopped buying non-essential services altogether. But here's the truth:

At Sprint Education, we work with hundreds of education companies every year and we've seen **the same pattern repeated across the sector**: cautious, cost-conscious schools are tightening purse strings but they are still purchasing when the right value is presented in the right way. This whitepaper is your roadmap to understanding what's driving the slowdown and how to respond.

We'll look at

- Why US schools' purchasing behavior has changed
- The five pressures driving budget caution
- How to pivot your messaging and strategies to stay relevant

While the easy wins might be harder to come by, a smarter, more strategic approach can put you [ahead of the competition](#) and help you build the kind of partnerships with schools that last well beyond this year's budget cycle.



It's a simple
lack of **money**."



5 REASONS . . .

Why US schools are spending less

"It's a simple lack of money."

Wrong!

It's actually a multi-layered, multi-faceted situation involving funding gaps, cost spikes, staffing crises, demographic shifts, and changing social expectations of schools.

As I see it there are five main reasons...





Reason 1 | The federal funding cliff

At first glance, federal investment in education since the pandemic looks historic: nearly \$190 billion was allocated to schools through ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds between 2020 and 2024. But as that support has ended districts are hitting a hard stop.

ESSER III, the largest and final tranche, expired in September 2024. Any money not spent (and documented) by early 2025 was clawed back by the federal government.

So, what's the problem?

Since 2021, many districts have used ESSER funds to:

- Hire academic interventionists and mental health staff
- Launch tech initiatives (1:1 devices, LMS platforms)
- Upgrade HVAC and facilities
- Subscribe to new curriculum tools

But most of these costs weren't one-time. They're recurring. And now, the funding that made them possible is vanishing.

While per pupil spend spiked in 2023, it's now heading off a cliff, just as inflation, staff shortages, and political scrutiny are ramping up, and funding isn't scaling the gap.



Superintendents and CFOs report:

- Drastically reduced budget flexibility
- Cuts to enrichment, PD, and new initiatives to preserve staffing
- "ESSER dependency audits" underway to figure out what gets dropped

Unless your product is tied to core academic delivery, student safety, compliance, or retention, it may be deferred, downsized, or scrapped altogether. However, and this is crucial, if you can tie your solution to real outcomes (learning recovery, cost savings, staff wellbeing), you can still win.

Schools aren't stopping spending. They're just redefining what's essential.





Reason 2 | The cost crisis hits schools

Salary pressures

Over the past two years, teacher pay has become one of the most hotly debated, and politically sensitive, issues in American education.

Since 2022, teacher unions and state legislatures across the country have pushed through significant salary increases to combat burnout and workforce shortages. For example:

- Los Angeles USD approved raises exceeding 21% across three years
- New York City and Chicago followed suit with 10-17% packages
- Texas, Oklahoma, and Florida have introduced new minimum salaries or incentive bonuses, some topping \$6,000–\$10,000

But here's the catch, many of these increases were funded temporarily through ESSER, local referendums, or one-time state surpluses. As of the recent budget cycle, districts are expected to sustain higher payroll costs without federal support.

The result?

- Staff retention pressure remains high
- Recurring salary obligations are growing
- And in many states, K–12 budgets are not increasing at the same pace

That gap is forcing districts to redirect funding from tech, enrichment, PD, and even maintenance to cover payroll. In addition to base salaries, school districts are also being hit by increases in:

- Health insurance premiums (up 7–10% nationally from 2023 to 2024)
- Retirement contributions, especially in states like Illinois and Kentucky with underfunded pension systems
- Local taxes and payroll add-ons that shift more cost burden onto schools

In real terms, this means staff costs are rising sharply, often by \$1,000–\$2,500 per staff member, annually. Now scale that across tens of thousands of employees in large districts!



Inflation hasn't just dented household incomes; it's devouring school budgets!



Our electricity bill went from \$24,000 in 2019 to **\$55,000** last year. No grant covers that.”



REASON 2 CONTINUED . . .

Energy and materials inflation

Although energy prices have stabilized from the 2022 peak, they remain dramatically higher than pre-crisis levels. Material costs (books, furniture, cleaning supplies) have also surged.

This means schools face \$40,000-\$95,000 extra costs annually compared to just a couple of years ago.



Reason 3 | Policies that create pressure

Underfunded mandates

Recent federal and state-level policies, though well-meaning, have placed significant new responsibilities on schools without providing sufficient funding to implement them. **Take, for example, free school meals.**

- In states like California, Maine, Colorado, and Minnesota, universal free lunch programs have been made permanent.
- While this is celebrated as a win for equity, many districts report that per-meal reimbursements haven't kept pace with costs.
- The USDA's 2024–25 per-meal reimbursement rate for lunch is around \$4.25, yet schools report real costs closer to \$4.80–\$5.10 in urban areas.

Another major example: Special education (IDEA) compliance

The federal government is required to fund 40% of the additional cost of educating students with disabilities, but currently funds less than 14%. That leaves states and districts to cover the gap.

As districts expand services like mental health counseling, 1:1 aides, and inclusive tech, they must reallocate funds from general education budgets.

Robbing Peter to pay Paul

For every new policy or mandate, no matter how important, there's a financial trade-off. And right now, schools are having to cut enrichment programs, elective courses, curriculum pilots, and tech upgrades to stay compliant.

Unless your product directly supports compliance, student wellbeing, or helps schools meet mandated goals efficiently, it could get sidelined, not because it lacks value, but because there's no money left to fund it.



Reason 4 | Falling pupil numbers

Since 2007 the USA's birth rate has been slowly declining meaning elementary schools are seeing lower intakes. Fewer children = less funding.

For schools in affected areas

- Annual budgets have shrunk significantly.
- Fixed costs (staff, building upkeep) have likely remained broadly the same. The result?

Extreme pressure on flexible spending.

Secondary schools will soon begin feeling this pressure too as smaller cohorts move up from elementary schools.

Reason 5 | Social change post-COVID

COVID didn't just disrupt learning; it reshaped the role schools play in communities.

Today, schools are expected to:

- Fill welfare gaps, like feeding children.
- Provide mental health services.
- Act as community hubs in deprived areas.

And of course, all of this means that more staff time is diverted to pastoral care, there's greater demand on school leadership, and new costs that aren't matched by new funding are appearing. Then, when budgets are triaged, the "extras" like workshops, enrichment programs, new platforms, and training days face an uphill battle unless they directly support wellbeing or academic recovery.

WHY K-12 SCHOOLS ARE SPENDING LESS

Roundup

Schools' spending decisions aren't just about tight budgets.

They're about survival priorities and US school leaders are now zoning in on:

- ✓ Keeping staff employed
- ✓ Meeting legal and academic obligations
- ✓ Supporting vulnerable students
- ✓ Managing optics in politically charged communities

Anything outside that needs to fight for its place and prove it is worthy of investment.

So what should you do?

It's easy to feel disheartened by this backdrop but the truth is: smart suppliers are still growing. They're doing it by pivoting their marketing and sales strategies to meet K-12 schools where they are today.

In the next section, I'll walk you through three sales and marketing strategies you can deploy immediately which will resonate with cash-strapped, risk-averse schools.

Ready? Let's dive in.



The truth is, smart education suppliers are still growing."

Ben Lewis — Sprint Education CEO



sprint-education.com

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

Strategy #1

POSITION YOURSELF AS A . . .

Critical investment

If you skipped to this section, here is a quick reminder of the reality check:

Schools aren't buying "nice-to-haves", they're buying:

- Core instruction tools
(aligned with mandates like the Science of Reading)
- Services that save staff time or reduce burnout
- Compliance essentials
(safety, accessibility, mental health screening)

If you want to win sales, you must frame your product or service as critical to survival, performance, or compliance.

This needs to be done by reframing your value proposition.

- "Boosts ELA scores by 8% in Title I districts"
- "Reduces office referrals by 30% with Tier 1 SEL supports"
- "Fully aligns with [state] Department of Education's literacy framework"

Here's an example of what I would call a weak value proposition: "A brilliant new resource for creative writing!"

This would be better: *"Proven to raise literacy attainment by 9% while supporting your learning outcomes."*

You'd be surprised at how many education companies don't even consider a value proposition, let alone implement one that resonates with the economic pressures schools face.

Position yourself #1: Quantify the impact

Schools need ammunition to justify spending internally.

- "Saves 20 admin hours per term."
- "Improves pupil attendance by 3%."
- "Cuts consumables spend by 15%."

Give them numbers, not adjectives, because schools need a business case. Help them build it.

Position yourself #2: Value-first content

Launch guides, checklists, or webinars.

- "How to cut \$20k from your school's operational spend."
- "5 ways to boost exam results without new staff."
- "Stretching this year's school budget: essential tips."

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

Strategy #2

LOWER . . .

The barrier to saying “YES”

In tough financial times, even if a school wants what you're offering, the payment process itself can block the sale.

The reality is:

- Schools often don't have lump sums available now.
- Budgets are tied to academic funding windows.
- Committees are cautious about committing to multi-year costs.

So, if you want to secure sales right now, you need to lower the upfront risk and make your offer feel flexible, forgiving, and low-pressure.

Lower the barrier #1: Flexible pricing options

- Instalment Plans – offer termly, quarterly, or monthly payments.
- Deferred Billing - “Sign up now, first payment - September.”
- Subscriptions - Instead of \$10,000 upfront, offer \$850/month.

Schools will be more open to committing to what you offer when the cash flow pain is spread out.

Lower the barrier #2: Free trials and pilots

Let's face it, risk-free sells better than risky. Some things you could implement are:

- Offering a 30-90 day free trial.
- Setting up “pilot programs” for district-wide clusters.
- Building in opt-out clauses (cancel within 60 days).

Applying any or all of the above will undoubtedly make K-12 leaders and budget holders feel safer. It'll also give schools the chance to experience the value before they have to budget for it. Oh, and of course - usage builds advocacy among staff. Don't underestimate the power non-budget holders can have in terms of pushing for your offering to be more widely adopted.

One of our clients built personalized “Pilot Success Packs” - resources to guide each school that piloted their SaaS through the successful usage of their product, increasing their conversion odds later.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

Strategy #2

CONTINUED . . .

Lower the barrier #3: Group deals

Schools love bulk savings - especially districts!

Why not consider:

- Multi-site pricing for district-wide or state-wide adoption
- Bundling multiple services together for one simple cost
- Promoting cross-sell packages: e.g. "Buy our literacy software, get free teacher training access."

Late last year one of our clients started bundling staff training into their core edtech package and lifted their average contract size.

Lower the barrier #4: Help find funding

Funding is out there but schools are overwhelmed with day-to-day pressures. This is where you come in!

Support buyers by:

- Building grants/funding guides (e.g. Title I, Perkins, ESSA)
- Drafting sample language for RFPs or board approval
- Helping schools build internal business cases

Schools will be more open to committing to what you offer when the cashflow pain is spread out.

One of our clients, a supplier of wellbeing workshops for elementary schools, launched a "Start Now, Pay Later" recently. Schools started their wellbeing interventions immediately but didn't pay until the new budget release.

Make buying from you the least risky, most manageable, and easiest choice on the table.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

Strategy #3

BUILD ...

Relationships, not transactions

When your budgets are tightened do you gamble? Unless you're Kenny Rogers you'll probably understand that schools also don't. They stick with companies they trust.

If you're not yet that trusted supplier you need to earn that trust before you ask for the sale. This means becoming part of the education community and not just appearing when you want to invoice someone.

Relationship builder #1: Share don't just sell

We've been advocates for this approach for more than a decade and a half! I literally cannot over-emphasize enough the value of publishing blog posts, videos, and PDFs offering genuinely useful content. Like this:

- "5 Smart Ways to Save Money in Your School."
- "Clever Curriculum Hacks to Boost Outcomes this term."
- "The Ultimate High School Budget Planner Template."

You could host webinars or short online workshops - even free 30-minute CPD tasters, or regular email digests sharing sector news, budget-saving tips, and leadership insights.

One of our client's regular "Funding" email series, sent every Friday, doubled their inbound leads within 3 months.

Don't underestimate how valuable being a thought leader is. It's everything!

Relationship builder #2: Localize, personalize

Schools are naturally "local". They trust familiar names and settings, and they talk. I was a teacher for seven years and as a young teacher I had teacher friends in seven other schools. In my experience teachers gravitate towards other teachers so make use of this fact.

Ultimately, if you can localize and personalize your approach and encourage teachers to talk about you, then you can prove you know their context and not just throw generic selling points at them.

Ways we encourage our clients to do that:

- Use case studies from the local area of your prospects.
- Mention regional challenges, specific performance concerns, etc.
- Reference districts directly if selling to district schools.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

Strategy #3

CONTINUED . . .

Relationship builder #3: Social proof

This one is a relationship builder that every education supplier should be employing. It's your quickest way for schools to see you as a good option.

Every time you work with a school you should be:

- Asking them for a testimonial, especially Principals and Superintendents. If you can get a photo to go with the testimonial even better.
- Then, always ask schools if you can use their logo on your website. It's easy for a web developer to create a carousel of logos of schools who you've worked with.

Finally, there's nothing better than an actual case study where you can dive deeper into the benefits you're providing a school. Use compelling value proposition titles to the case study e.g. "How XX School Saved \$12,000 Using [Product]".

Ultimately show that you're real, relatable, and results-focused.

Relationship builder #4: Play the long game

Don't expect instant sign-offs. Schools have harder decisions to make than ever. You need to allow them the time and space to build up confidence in you and also in building up a commercial case internally for you.

When funding does free up (often unpredictably), schools will turn first to the suppliers who've been showing up all along.

Put yourself in the best possible position by:

- Nurturing leads with newsletters and content.
- Offering second demos or strategy calls without pushing hard.
- Staying visible, helpful, and supportive, even when budgets are frozen.

To win schools' trust and become their go-to supplier, focus on building long-term relationships by sharing genuinely helpful content, localizing your approach, showcasing social proof, and consistently supporting them without always selling.



Turning strategies into action

So far, you've got the core strategic pillars in place:

- Prove return on investment
- Make buying from you easy and low-risk
- Build relationships and trust before selling

Now let's put these into a simple, practical action plan you can start implementing today that will help you build campaigns, content, and sales approaches that actually work in today's cautious education market.



List Built	
✓	
<input type="checkbox"/> Name	<input type="checkbox"/> Job Title
<input type="checkbox"/> Mr Nicholas Donlon	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> Mrs Jenny Smith	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> Mr S Henderson	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> Mrs J Bell	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> Mrs Emma Scott	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> Mr M Pannell	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> Ms Rachel Clarke	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> Mr Damian Dwyer	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> Miss L Williams	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> Mr Wayne Wightman	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> Mrs Z Coyle	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> David Kay	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> Ian Moran	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/> Katherine M	Head of Maths
<input type="checkbox"/>



Step 1 | Audit your current offer

Before you change your marketing, you need to understand how your current offer looks through today's lens.

Ask yourself:

- Is our core message focused on outcomes or features?
- Can we quantify the savings, improvements, or benefits we deliver?
- Are we offering flexible ways to pay (plans, free trials, deferred billing)?
- Have we made it crystal clear why schools should trust us now?

If you can't answer, "Yes" to all four then it's time to update your positioning.

Step 2 | Refocus your messaging

Tighten every headline, email subject line, and landing page around what matters now:

- Cost savings
- Time savings
- Core educational outcomes (attendance, wellbeing, attainment)
- Statutory compliance
- Staff wellbeing and retention

Remove generic language like "innovative" or "exciting" - replace with quantified impacts wherever possible.

Use an urgent but empathetic tone: "We know budgets are tight. That's why [Solution] helps you achieve [Goal] without breaking the budget."

Step 3 | Launch a value-first campaign

Provide useful content immediately - even before you talk about selling.

Ideas:

- Budget-saving tipsheets for budget holders
- Free staff wellbeing CPD webinars
- Checklists for preparing for exam periods

Format them into:

- Blogs
- Downloadable PDFs
- Email nurture series
- Webinar series
- LinkedIn articles

Every piece of content should help a school solve a real problem they're facing today - even if they never buy from you.

Step 4 | Build risk-reducing offers

Introduce:

- Free trials
- Low-cost pilots
- Deferred billing options
- Flexible contract lengths (1 year vs. 3 year)

Promote "zero risk" offers in your marketing:

- "Try free for 90 days - no commitment"
- "Start today, first payment September"
- "Pilot project with full support included"

Make offers deadline-driven where appropriate (but avoid heavy discounting unless strategic - to protect brand value).

Step 5

Start or strengthen your community presence

If you don't already:

- Join didstict forums, Facebook groups, LinkedIn groups
- Attend local or regional network meetings (virtual or in-person)
- Submit articles to education newsletters and blogs
- Follow and interact with school leadership on LinkedIn

Share content, insights, and tips regularly - NOT just promotional material.

Build a database of local case studies and testimonials to use regionally.

Step 6

Personalize your outreach

Break your database down by:

- School type (elementary, high, private, etc.)
- State/location
- Current challenges

Tailor campaigns:

- Referencing regional pressures
- Using local success stories
- Targeting the right stakeholders

Conclusion

How to win in a cautious K-12 market

Today's US education market isn't "broken." It's just cautious, careful, and cooler towards anything that doesn't scream value.

Schools still have needs and ambitions and they definitely still want better outcomes for their students but the rules have changed. So must your approach to marketing and selling.

- ✓ **You must** prove ROI in dollars, in time saved, or in improved results.
- ✓ **You must** lower the friction with easy starts, flexible payments, or no-risk pilots.
- ✓ **You must** be trustworthy not just a seller, but a partner, a steady presence.



Head Teachers in Secondary Schools
Your list will reach 3,226 contacts

English Teachers in Secondary Schools
Your list will reach 15,248 contacts



Multi-Academy Trust CEOs
Your list will reach 1,812 contacts



The Sprint way

At Sprint Education, we work with organizations who don't want to shout louder - they want to speak smarter.

If you:

- ✓ Understand that schools are overwhelmed
- ✓ Are willing to adapt your messaging to match reality
- ✓ Want to grow sustainably, ethically, and intelligently

Then this year could actually be one of your best years yet.

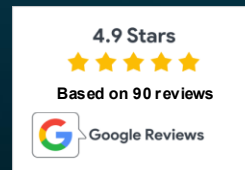
The suppliers who survive this market won't be the ones with the deepest discounts or flashiest ads. They'll be the ones who understand schools, support them, and deliver real, lasting value.

Want help planning your upcoming campaigns?

Get in touch and we'll help you create outreach that feels less like a pitch... and more like a partnership.

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