

4 Common Problems in Education Procurement



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The education industry has procurement needs just like any other. They need to ensure all educational institutions in their district have the computers, textbooks, and other materials they need to be successful for their staff and students. Oftentimes, however, like other businesses operating in the public sector, they face a number of challenges that prevent them from having a flexible and efficient procurement process.

Lots of Regulation to Comply With

Outside the United States, public procurement law is regulated through the EU Directives and the Treat on the Functioning of the European Union. In Northern Ireland in particular, these are implemented through the UK procurement regulations that are applicable to all public entities. Procurement in education has to comply with this legislation and all its directives, along with the NI Public Procurement Policy, including policies around getting the best value for the money, using a procurement center, and awarding contracts to the most economically advantageous tender. That said, there is no additional guidance or law surrounding education industry specific procurement.

In the United States, there are both state and federal guidelines to maintain compliance with, so this issue isn't limited to Ireland or European countries. And though higher education institutions generally have more available funds than public bodies in the K12 sectors, they still need to stay within the necessary procurement thresholds, so they too, have regulations to comply with that complicate the process for them as well.

Too Many Cooks in the Kitchen

Procurement in education is carried out by multiple education bodies, leading to a fragmented approach that not only makes it overall less efficient, but less organized and generally more chaotic.

For instance, controlled schools are handled by Education and Library Boards (ELBs) otherwise known as Centers of Procurement Expertise (CoPE), which are responsible for procuring goods and services, as well as maintenance work. Any grant-aided schools outside the controlled sector have their goods and services procured by Trustees or the Board of Governors of each school. The ELBs handle the maintenance work for any maintained schools. And to further complicate matters, any volunteer grammars and grant-maintained integrated schools handle their own maintenance arrangements.

Any arms length bodies, such as the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, and The Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment, have access to ELB good and services contracts, but the majority still make their own procurement arrangements.

Government procurement can do their part to help schools by allowing procurement officers a bit more flexibility in what and how they buy what they need. With fewer people involved in the process, there's less potential for roadblocks and complications. Designating a procurement officer at the school level with a set amount of purchasing power who goes to a central office for approval for the entire county or district, which is then submitted to the state, reduces the number of people or agencies that need to be involved, while still ensuring the schools get what they need when they need it.

Lack of Strong Procurement Strategy and Procedure

It's difficult to take a coordinated approach to education procurement because of the five CoPEs in various locations throughout the country. There are numerous issues within the supply chain because each procurement center operates individually, so there isn't much coordination between all of them. There is a rather complex approvals process, and it takes a long time to procure good and services and complete orders.

“When you consider various departments in schools have drastically different needs -

such as the difference between music and arts departments compared to science or math departments, having such a fragment procurement approach creates unnecessary strain on staff and students.”

This is due in part, to the fact, that regulations require everyone to purchase products and award contracts to the lowest bidder so they get the lowest price for high value, but not necessarily the best quality goods, that could end up being cheaper over the long term. As such, it may mean many schools don't get the specific products the departments want or need - but instead something similar, or something that functions as a low-quality substitute, at best.

It may mean taking cues from other highly regulated industries to develop better, stronger, procurement strategies and procedures across the board. Schools, and especially higher-education facilities, need to be particularly transparent in all of the procurement process.

Not Enough Skilled and Experienced Procurement Staff Members

Likely at least partly related to the fact that few jobs in education or public service type industries pay well enough to live comfortably, the education industry in particular lacks the total number of highly-qualified and experienced procurement professionals they need to effectively get the procurement process developed and executed as efficiently as possible. Before they can expect real improvement, it's critical to look at professional development opportunities to strengthen the knowledge and expertise of current staff, in addition to recruiting additional staff members.

If procurement professionals in the education sector, and other public sector bodies, could come together to develop better procurement practices that still remain in compliance with any applicable legal regulations, they may find they will be able to save themselves a lot of money. Streamlining the entire tendering process, for instance, could shorten the procurement lifecycle and lead to better supply management. The good news is that because educational bodies are required to follow government guidelines for procurement, there is plenty of guidance that exists, making it easier for education procurement to achieve good practices that will save time and money in the future.

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