



The Changing Landscape of IT Support in Schools

IT support in schools is no longer about making sure computers turn on in the morning as IT becomes part of the critical infrastructure that supports learning, communications, safeguarding and school management. From the school's email systems and cloud-based learning platforms, interactive whiteboards to biometric catering systems, a school's IT environment is a complex service that requires management, maintenance and strategy. Yet the resources allocated to support IT services in schools regularly fall short, leaving schools with overstretched Technicians, inadequate infrastructure and rising cybersecurity threats.

In this paper, we look at IT support in UK schools and explore some of the real challenges faced by schools and their IT Teams. We discuss how the role of IT has evolved far beyond basic troubleshooting and now encompasses a wide range of responsibilities critical to daily school operations. We also consider the skills and resources required to meet these demands and the implications for schools striving to keep pace with ever-changing digital standards and expectations.

The Breadth of IT Services in Schools

Gone are the days when school IT teams were mainly concerned with keeping printers online and resetting forgotten passwords. Today, the range of services supported by an IT team is vast and increasingly complex.

Network infrastructure must be fast, secure and always available because pretty much every classroom now depends on it. Schools are expected to provide wireless access across their site, manage a growing estate of devices such as laptops, desktops, Chromebooks and iPads as well as maintain reliable access to cloud services like Microsoft 365 or Google Workspace. This alone is a challenge, but sadly it's just the beginning.



There's also the need to manage the hidden services such as servers, storage, switching, filtering solutions and user accounts. Add in software licensing, specialist teaching applications, MIS and classroom management tools and the scope quickly becomes overwhelming. According to the Department for Education's (DfE) Digital and Technology Standards for schools and colleges, all this must be managed to a level that meets modern benchmarks.

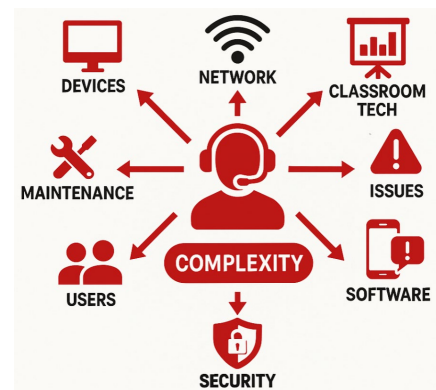
These standards call for schools to not only maintain the technology but to also ensure appropriate digital leadership and governance is in place. This includes having an up-to-date asset and contract register, documented policies for digital strategy and strategic planning aligned to the school's educational objectives. For many small internal IT teams, keeping up with this level of demand is simply not possible.

The Skillset Schools Need

Supporting a modern school environment requires an impressive blend of skills. Technicians must be adept in networking, device management, software deployment, cybersecurity and cloud infrastructure. But more than that,

they must also understand education-specific needs, such as how technology integrates into the classroom, how to support teachers in real time and how to implement filtering and monitoring tools that meet safeguarding requirements.

Beyond the technical skillset, there's a strong governance element. The DfE places a real emphasis on the importance of clear leadership and strategic oversight of technology. Schools must demonstrate that they can plan for the future, manage their assets responsibly and respond to incidents swiftly and effectively. IT staff are increasingly expected to feed into strategic decision-making, to help shape teaching methods as well as take on elements of procurement and compliance.



This evolving IT role within education is welcome but also demanding. In many cases, the people performing

these tasks are working solo or in very small teams, without formal training in all the areas they're expected to cover. Sadly, it's a recipe for long term failure, especially when they're constantly firefighting day-to-day technical issues.

The Constant Threat of Cyber Incidents

Unfortunately, the risk of a cybersecurity incident is a daily reality. Education is the second most frequently targeted sector for cyberattacks such as ransomware, predominantly because of its limited resources and large stores of sensitive information.

The DfE's standards require schools to implement robust security practices. This includes multi-factor authentication, regular backups, network monitoring and incident response planning. These are high expectations, and rightly so. But implementing these protection mechanisms is not easy and many schools lack either the in-house expertise to secure their environments or the tools to carry out regular activities, such as penetration testing or managing firewalls.



Sometimes the challenge is also time-based. There are only so many hours in the day and when there is a list of operational problems to resolve to keep teachers teaching, it's the backend activities that get missed, such as documenting the environment, checking logs, raising awareness among staff and students

of phishing threats and ensuring policies are followed consistently. Unfortunately, the consequence of a cyber incident can be enormous, affecting not just data integrity but also the short- and medium-term operation of the school.

The Problem of Funding and Resource

The IT demand on schools is increasing, but funding remains a significant challenge and rarely keeps pace. The education sector has faced years of budget tightening and IT is often one of the first areas to feel the pinch. Many schools still face tough decisions daily, with IT investment frequently being postponed or scaled back.

This underinvestment affects everything from aging infrastructure and slow connectivity to outdated devices and limited staffing. It builds risk and creates inconsistency of provision across the country, with some schools able to deliver a modern digital learning environment, while others struggle with systems that literally belong in another decade.

The frequent lack of funding for IT Services means many schools end up reactive rather than proactive and there are rarely plans for development or innovation. Instead, Technicians spend their time solving today's problems rather than looking to the future.

Attracting and Retaining IT Staff

Recruiting skilled IT staff into schools is a real challenge. The private sector offers higher salaries, clearer progression and a more structured professional development. For school Technicians, the role can often feel isolated, underappreciated and lacking the recognition it deserves.

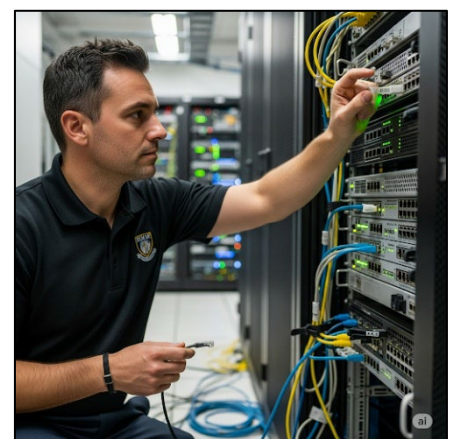
Even when schools do find talented Technicians, retaining them is another challenge. With limited

career growth opportunities and sometimes little support for continuing training and professional development, many leave for roles in industry where their skills are better rewarded. This creates a revolving door that prevents many schools from building a stable and experienced IT team.

This issue is compounded by a national shortage of IT professionals. The demand for tech skills is high across all sectors and education is competing in a buoyant labour market. Unless Network Manager and Technician roles are revalued and resourced properly, this recruitment crisis is likely to continue.

How Third Parties Can Support Schools

This is where third-party support providers can offer schools a sustainable model for robust IT management. Their role has evolved in line with the increasing technical demands placed on schools, providing a scalable and adaptable support structure. However, the type of external support that works best varies significantly depending on the size and complexity of the school or Multi Academy Trust (MAT).



For smaller schools, typically primary schools and single-site secondaries, the most practical and impactful approach is often some kind of outsourced model. These schools generally do not have the budget or ongoing need to support a fully staffed in-house IT team, especially

one capable of covering the full spectrum of skills needed to meet the Department for Education's Digital and Technology Standards.



A provider will be able to deliver comprehensive support, maintain infrastructure, manage cloud platforms, monitor security, deploy devices, support users and ensure compliance documentation is maintained. Notably, they can also introduce schools to best-practice frameworks for cybersecurity and digital governance. In our experience, almost all primary schools rely entirely on external IT support due to scale and cost-effectiveness.

Secondary schools and smaller MATs often find value in either a fully outsourced or a hybrid approach, whereby internal staff manage day-to-day user support and onsite troubleshooting, whilst third parties handle more complex activities such as third-line network issues, cybersecurity protection and testing, cloud migrations or strategic advice. This allows schools to retain internal knowledge and continuity while also benefiting from the broader expertise and resilience that a specialist organisation can provide.

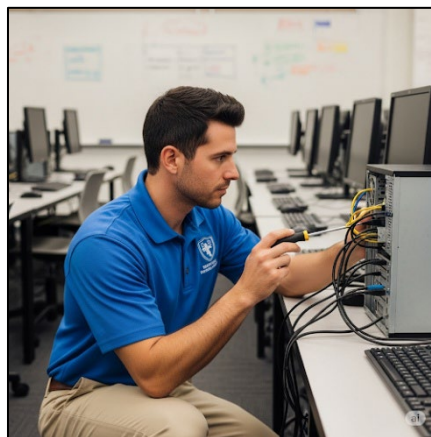
Larger MATs, especially those managing multiple primary and secondary schools across different regions, are sometimes better positioned to build and maintain an in-house IT services team. Larger MATs often operate more like corporate organisations in terms of scale, supporting thousands of devices and pupils and hundreds of staff across multiple sites. For them, an internal team provides tighter control, increased capacity, faster internal communication and a

deeper understanding of each school's needs. These in-house teams can include roles such as Technicians, Network Managers, Security Officers, Cloud Engineers and Infrastructure Specialists.

That said, even the largest MATs benefit from external partnerships. Many engage third parties for specialist support, penetration testing, strategic reviews, disaster recovery planning or specialised training. Most large MATs supplement their internal teams with some form of external expertise, highlighting that even well-resourced Trusts benefit from outsourcing functions to stay up to date with technological developments.

External providers can also help demystify DfE compliance by completing audits or consultancy to ensure that schools are meeting the expectations around security, cloud usage, leadership governance and asset management. This is especially useful for smaller schools or Trusts that don't have the in-house capacity to stay on top of changing policy and technical frameworks.

Ultimately, the right model depends on scale, budget and internal capacity. What matters most is that IT support is reliable, strategic and aligned with a combination of the school's goals and regulatory requirements. Third-party providers, when chosen wisely, can help schools of all sizes strike that balance.



This is where third-party support providers, such as Virtue Technologies, can offer much-

needed relief. Their involvement can take many forms, from occasional helpdesk support to full-scale strategic partnerships.

For smaller schools, including primary schools and secondary schools and smaller MATs, a partnership model often makes the most sense. These schools may lack the scale to justify a full-time in-house team with the broad range of skills needed to meet modern requirements. An IT Partner can provide a complete package at a fixed and predictable cost. This helps small schools access enterprise-level IT without overstressing their limited budgets.

Larger MATs, particularly those with centralised IT functions, may benefit more from building out their own internal IT teams. With multiple sites and thousands of users, these organisations can justify investing in a full in-house structure, often with roles covering infrastructure, support, cybersecurity and digital strategy. That said, even these organisations often turn to external providers for specialist support, consultancy, security audits or one-off projects.

The Benefits of External Support

Partnering with an external IT support provider offers a host of tangible benefits for schools striving to deliver the best possible educational experience. One of the primary advantages is the assurance and reliability that comes with entrusting critical IT functions to a dedicated team of specialists. External partners bring a wealth of experience and up-to-date knowledge, having worked across multiple schools. This means that, rather than facing IT challenges alone, school leaders and staff can rely on experts who are well-versed in the latest technologies, threats and solutions.

Access to a broader talent pool is another significant benefit. Many

schools, particularly those with limited budgets or smaller internal teams, may struggle to recruit and retain staff with the full range of expertise required to manage complex IT systems. External IT partners typically employ specialists in areas such as cybersecurity, cloud solutions, network management and compliance, ensuring that schools receive high-quality support across all aspects of their IT provision. This access to specialist skills not only resolves technical issues more efficiently but also enables schools to

make informed decisions on technology investments and future planning.

A key element of working with external IT support is the guarantee provided by a service level agreement (SLA). An SLA sets out clear expectations regarding response times, issue resolution and the scope of services covered. This clarity allows school leaders to budget with confidence, knowing that their investment in IT support will deliver measurable outcomes and

avoid unexpected costs. Engaging an external partner does not mean replacing internal IT staff. Rather, it enhances and supports the existing team. By sharing the workload, schools can scale their IT provision to meet growing demands without overstretching internal staff. This collaborative approach can also introduce a further level of assurance in areas such as cybersecurity and compliance, helping schools safeguard sensitive data and maintain standards.

Looking Ahead

Network Managers and Technicians in schools are doing amazing work, often under immense pressure. But they can't do it all. By engaging with third-party providers, whether for occasional support or through fully centralised support models, schools can build more resilient, secure and effective IT environments. It's not just about keeping the lights on anymore, it's about building digital systems that support learning, safeguard students and prepare schools for the future.

References

- DfE Digital and Technology Standards for Schools and Colleges
- Virtue Technologies

About Virtue Technologies

Virtue Technologies is an education-focused IT company with nearly two decades of experience partnering with schools to deliver tailored technology solutions. Established in 2006, the company has become a leading provider of IT services for Primary and Secondary Schools and Multi Academy Trusts. Their key areas of expertise are Support, Cyber Security, Cloud Solutions and Classroom Productivity.

Virtue Technologies offer a wide range of support services specifically designed for the evolving needs of schools, whether they are small Primaries or large Multi Academy Trusts.

With a clear commitment to enhancing educational outcomes through technology, Virtue Technologies collaborates closely with academic institutions to understand their unique needs and challenges. The company emphasises building long-term partnerships, ensuring that each solution not only aligns with current requirements but also anticipates future growth. Their dedicated team of professionals stays abreast of technological advancements, allowing them to introduce innovative practices and resources into classrooms efficiently. Over the years, Virtue Technologies has earned a strong reputation within the educational sector for reliability, adaptability and exemplary customer service. By focusing on continuous support and professional development, they empower educators and administrators to make the most of their

IT investments, fostering enriching learning environments for students across all levels of education.

About the Author

Will Stead has over 35 years of experience in IT management and leadership, spending the last 15 years specialising in the education sector, supporting schools and Multi Academy Trusts across the UK.

Will's expertise lies in developing and implementing IT strategies tailored for both individual schools and MATs. He works directly with school leadership teams and IT departments to create strategic plans that drive digital transformation, improve classroom productivity and ensure robust cybersecurity practices. His approach is highly collaborative, focusing on building strong relationships and trust with stakeholders to deliver technology solutions that are both effective and sustainable.

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