Working with schools
A practical guide for independent booksellers

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1) Introduction

The importance of school business

There’s no doubt that the children’s and schools’ markets are important for independent booksellers. Nielsen data shows that in recent years sales of children’s, young adult and educational books have grown faster than overall book sales and currently represent just under 25% of the total UK consumer book market, with an annual value in 2016 of £382m. High street retailers have a 65% share of the children’s books market, which is significantly higher than for adult books, and only 4% of children’s books are sold as eBooks. According to the UK Publishing Year Book, in 2016 the UK school books market was worth £179m and is growing.

However, there is equally no doubt that these sectors are hard to crack, particularly the schools’ market. Apathy and lack of interest from schools are common complaints – Rachel Jones from Wardle & Jones Books in Scarborough says, “I have contacted many schools in the area and it has been difficult to get a response” – while their local bookshop might not be the first place schools go to purchase books, largely because they can buy cheaper elsewhere, whether it’s online, from specialist school or library suppliers, or direct from publishers. As Rebecca Pirt of Leaf Children’s Bookshop in Hertford comments, “I think a lot of schools buy their books from Amazon as, even with my discount, they can get them cheaper, and those with a dedicated librarian sometimes order direct from a wholesaler.”

Vivian Archer of the Newham Bookshop in East London concedes it’s hard, if not impossible, to compete with Amazon on price, but emphasises that teachers want and need the expertise booksellers can provide, and a bookshop can tailor its books and services to the schools it works with.

Most bookshops surveyed were working with an average of nine schools and those schools could be of any type, and located up to 13 miles away, but there is clearly scope for expansion and most shops did indeed report that their school business is growing.
Customer acquisition and successful marketing appears to be strongly based around good relationships with the teachers, regular local contact and word of mouth, so, as Vivian Archer says, “Create relationships with schools. Go in, talk to people, offer recommendations and have that personal interaction.”

Once you’ve established strong relationships, maintaining them can also be a challenge, because staff turnover can be high, as are the figures for teachers leaving the profession, reflecting the day-to-day pressure they’re under, so to work successfully with schools it does take dedication, persistent networking, lateral thinking, creative approaches and significant amounts of stamina. “It’s tough,” acknowledges Newham Bookshop’s Vivian, “but it’s absolutely worth it. It’s so rewarding when people come in and tell us they bought their first book here when they were a child.”

2) Ways to work

a) Key stage and library supply

Supplying collections of books for a specific key stage, curriculum area or topic, whether for classroom book corners or school libraries, is one of the key ways in which booksellers can work with schools. However, putting together themed collections does require knowledge and expertise. If you’re already a specialist children’s bookseller or have previously worked in education you will have that knowledge and expertise, but if you’re not it will take time to build that up.

Unfortunately, there is no one central place you can go to for information on, say, titles suitable for a key stage 1 topic on under the sea or key stage 2 books about the Tudors, but some of the wholesalers – Bertrams, for instance – produce catalogues that bring together resources suitable for primary or secondary schools and these can be a very useful starting point for those who are new to selling to education.
Some wholesalers might encourage you to distribute their catalogues to schools, and they might run an affiliate scheme that will allow schools to name you as their local bookshop and earn you a small commission. Be cautious though; with access to the wholesalers’ catalogues, schools could simply purchase the books from elsewhere. You need to position yourself, not the wholesaler, as the authority on books for education and you need to make sure you own the relationship with schools in your locality. Also make sure you check that publisher catalogues are up to date – some might not be.

Other good advice is making sure you stay up to date with what’s new by seeing publishers’ reps on a regular basis and not neglecting what smaller publishers have to offer either. When you see a volume you’re impressed by, whether it’s quality fiction or non-fiction for children or young adults, keep a note of it, because you never know when you might be able to fit it into a primary topic box or a secondary library collection.

“Know the book! Unless it’s part of a series, it’s essential to know the book you’re promoting to a school. Teachers may not have the time to read it, so they’ll trust your judgement.”


Most, though not necessarily all, local authorities have a schools’ library service, run by qualified children’s librarians, which lends books, fiction and non-fiction, and other resources to schools for their libraries and classrooms. A schools’ library service might also provide training or offer expertise on how to develop a culture that encourages reading, and sometimes they organise events, such as author visits, or literacy initiatives, such as Reading Challenges or Drop Everything And Read days.

Individual schools usually buy into these services on an annual basis via a service level agreement, but they are not obliged to do so. A ‘pay as you go’ arrangement may also be available. Even if a school subscribes to its local schools’ library service, that doesn’t mean it doesn’t buy books as well.

It’s worth trying to cultivate a relationship with the schools’ library service in your county or borough, because staff are usually experts in children’s fiction and non-fiction for specific key stages, and they sometimes produce book lists, too, so you may be able to tap into their knowledge. They will also understand the education system and know the schools in your area, which could prove helpful in terms of building your own network, and there may be ways you can work together.

b) Events – fairs, authors, WBD

Organising or taking part in events, whether it’s book fairs, author visits or activities around a specific celebration such as World Book Day or a one-off like a literary festival, are vital for creating and maintaining a high profile with schools in your community and will help generate both direct and indirect business.

As Fiona Kennedy of The Pitshanger Bookshop in Ealing, notes, “For us, running stalls at school book fairs and going into schools with authors to sell their books are the most effective way of building awareness of the bookshop, because you are in the school for a period of time, meeting teachers, pupils and parents. Conversations lead to other opportunities and ideas. Often the fact that a parent or pupil has met a reasonably friendly human being and seen a selection of books makes them want to visit the shop and see the full range.”

Whatever the event, it’s important to make sure you, the school and the publisher or author have clear expectations, including the approximate size of the audience and the books the author will be referring to during the event. Tereze Brikmane, from Tales on Moon Lane in Herne Hill, offers some good advice when she says, “You have to know what the children or students are like, so ask the librarian or teacher, and match the author to the audience. Some authors are more comfortable with a hands-on workshop, some are better with a presentation.”
Natasha Radford of Chicken and Frog Bookshop, in Brentwood, Essex, adds, “If the event is really interactive, sales at the school and then in the shop are definitely better. Pre-order books – provide the school with a letter to send out and a strict deadline! – but always add additional copies, because there are always parents who forget.”

The parent’s perspective

“Our local bookshop brings authors into my daughters’ school to do readings and run question and answer sessions – they love it. My oldest has become a big fan of last author she saw, we’ve been back to the bookshop loads of times to buy the next in the series….it seems a long series.”
Dad, Elmbridge, Surrey

“My son thoroughly enjoyed the author visits arranged with his school and our local bookshop and he was thrilled when he saw the bookshop’s window display for the book from the last author visit – so much so that he insisted that we go into the shop.”
Mum, Nottingham.

World Book Day

World Book Day, which takes place every year in March, is a fantastic opportunity to engage with schools. If you don’t work with schools already it’s an ideal way to start, and if you do it’s a chance to extend your reach – most primary schools and a large proportion of secondary schools in the UK support World Book Day in some shape or form.

Run by a small charity, sponsored by National Book Tokens, and generously supported by publishers and booksellers, World Book Day is all about celebrating reading and is specifically designed to get young people into bookshops. World Book Day £1 book tokens and a resource pack go out to schools at the beginning of the year, and there is plenty of support for booksellers available, including posters, a branding kit and PR materials, and inspirational ideas for promoting reading. If you’re planning a World Book Day event, you can also let schools know about it by uploading details to the World Book Day website.

In 2017, 15 million World Book Day £1 book tokens were distributed to 45,000 educational establishments, from nurseries to secondary schools, throughout the UK and Ireland. A record-breaking 1 million £1 books were sold and a total of 1.25 million book tokens were redeemed. In other words, in addition to the special World Book Day books, 250,000 other children’s books were also sold, at a £1 discount off the full price, in the space of a month. Many of those young customers won’t have been in a bookshop before – and many of them will be back.

“World Book Day books cost us 10p per copy, but we gain enormously. This year we took 1200 vouchers, which is 1200 children who came through the door, and don’t forget they all have parents who buy grown-up books.”
Vivian Archer, The Newham Bookshop
c) Occasional purchasing and prizes

Whether it’s to encourage literacy development, reward them for achievement or attendance, or as Christmas presents, schools often buy books to give to their pupils. Primaries, for instance, commonly offer year 6 pupils their choice from a selection of books as a leaving gift or a secondary school might give upcoming year 7s a book to ease the transition process. Many establishments also still invite parents to a formal prize-giving ceremony where the prizes are books or National Books Tokens.

Every year bookshops sell thousands of pounds worth of National Book Tokens to local schools for celebrations and prize-giving events. If there are schools in your area which aren’t major customers you might find that the provision of National Book Tokens will help you establish a new relationship from which you can build other areas of supply.

The introduction of National Book Tokens that schools can personalise with their crest or motto has created more opportunities in this area.

Of course, teachers will often drop into a bookstore in person to buy books for not only their pupils, but for themselves as well. Capitalising on customer interactions like these is important because they could result in return visits and potentially further, perhaps larger, purchases. Fiona Kennedy from The Pits hanger Bookshop in Ealing, London, says, “Sometimes a casual chat can lead somewhere. For example, one customer mentioned that she was a music teacher and had to use up her budget, but didn’t know what books were available. We offered to come up with a list of suggestions and this led to an order. A simple question like ‘How’s your week been?’ can lead somewhere without any need for a hard sell.”

When teachers buy books, even if they’re books for school, they may well be paying for them themselves, but if they’re able to claim for their purchases, consider offering to send the school an invoice. It’s a small thing, but the teacher will probably warm to you and it could be the beginning of a more formal relationship with the school.

d) An advisory service

Of course, it varies widely, but teachers, even English teachers, don’t necessarily read a lot or know much about books. As one wrote in the Guardian’s Secret Teacher column in May 2017, “I know for a fact that several of my colleagues have never read anything by Charles Dickens, Jane Austen or the Brontës, and nothing longer than 600 pages that isn’t by JK Rowling.”

As a bookseller, however, you do know a great deal about books – what’s new, what’s good, what’s suitable – and that knowledge is central to the added value you can offer schools. Teachers almost certainly don’t have time to gain that knowledge for themselves, so whether it’s advising on classic picture books, suggesting titles for a key stage 1 topic on animals or refreshing the poetry section in the school library, make it clear that you are a reliable and authoritative source of advice and supply.

“Teachers don’t necessarily know anything about books – they’re teachers, they teach – so we offer a helping hand and a better service.”

Fiona Chope, Walter Henry’s Bookshop

Library audits and library redesign are avenues to explore, too, but they require more experience. Specifying shelf sizes and layout in a school library, for instance, is a fairly specialist undertaking, plus budgets for this type of project may be substantial and it can be all too easy to make expensive mistakes. Think about what services you are confident about offering and, as Marilyn Brocklehurst of the Norfolk Children’s Book Centre, says, “Be aware of your limitations… Learn, and gain knowledge and expertise, before you offer advice.”
3) The schools sector and education market

Although some booksellers will have acquired educational expertise in a previous professional life, you really don’t need to be an expert on education to work with schools. However, if it’s a while since you were at school yourself, knowledge of the system and how it works will undoubtedly be useful.

Education is devolved in the UK, so the systems in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have some differences, but there are over 30,000 educational establishments in the UK as a whole, ranging from children’s centres to further education colleges, and all are potential customers for independent booksellers.

Total UK schools and colleges

Within these figures there will be further categorisation and this will vary according to region, in England for instance, state-funded primary and secondary schools can be community schools, foundation schools, voluntary-aided or voluntary-controlled schools, academies or free schools, all with varying funding and governance arrangements, but all with some level of control over budgets.

Just over 60% of secondary schools are academies. The number of primary academies is lower, at about 15%, but continues to grow. Academies are not run by local authorities, but by academy trusts, and receive their funding direct from the Department for Education. They have certain freedoms which maintained schools don’t have, for example although their curriculum must be broad and balanced they aren’t obliged to follow the National Curriculum, but in practice the way in which most work isn’t radically different to the way in which maintained schools work.

However, academies are likely to be part of a local or national multi-academy trust or chain and that chain may operate centralised procurement or have preferred suppliers. On the downside, this can make it hard for smaller entities such as independent booksellers to do business with individual academies, but on the upside a link with one academy can open up access to other academies in the group.

Maintained schools are also being encouraged to share expertise and resources, and work together, and executive heads are increasingly responsible for two or more schools, so that can potentially offer an opportunity to extend your network of relationships, too.
To give a sense of how the market breaks down, the table below gives an indication of the numbers of each type of school in England, as well as the age ranges and key stages each type covers. The proportions of different types of primary and secondary schools will be similar for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of school (England)</th>
<th>Number of schools (England only)</th>
<th>Age range (England)</th>
<th>Key stage (England)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children's centres</td>
<td>3,187</td>
<td>0–5</td>
<td>Foundation stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurseries</td>
<td>1,172</td>
<td>0–5</td>
<td>Foundation stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary schools</td>
<td>12,849</td>
<td>5–11</td>
<td>Key stages 1 and 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary schools</td>
<td>3,401</td>
<td>11–16+</td>
<td>Key stages 3, 4 and 5 (sixth form)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academies</td>
<td>6,244</td>
<td>5–18</td>
<td>Key stages 1 to 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free schools</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>5–18</td>
<td>Key stages 1 to 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent schools</td>
<td>2,311</td>
<td>5–18</td>
<td>Key stages 1 to 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleges</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>16–18+</td>
<td>Key stage 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Department for Education*
By far the largest proportion of any school’s budget will be spent on staffing – at least 70%, but quite possibly more. For local authority maintained schools the financial year usually runs from April to March, while for academies, and independents, it is likely to be September to August.

In simple terms, schools are funded on the basis of the number of pupils they have, so a large secondary school will obviously have a bigger budget than a small primary school. However, school funding is not increasing and inflationary pressures plus extra employer costs mean that mainstream schools are currently experiencing significant real-term financial cuts.

There are some differences in the way the English, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish education systems are structured, and each country has its own curriculum (see Further Resources section 10). Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, for example, is far less prescriptive than the English National Curriculum, which sets out in some detail the essential knowledge and skills every child attending a local authority maintained school in England should be taught.

However, even in England, teachers have a relatively high degree of freedom to design a curriculum for their pupils’ needs. The content that must be covered is described in programmes of study for each key stage and subject on the Department for Education’s website, and it’s definitely worth familiarising yourself with them. Exam board do set texts for GCSE and A level at key stages 4 and 5, but at key stages 1, 2 and 3, although broad themes are stipulated, there aren’t mandatory texts and schools have a certain amount of choice about which particular aspects they choose to focus on.

For instance, the history curriculum for key stage 1 states that children must be taught about significant national or global historic events – examples given are the Great Fire of London or the first aeroplane flight – but although many primary schools do use these examples, they’re not obliged to. This means that if you’re looking to forge a relationship with a particular school it’s really helpful if you can find out as many specifics as possible about how it approaches the curriculum and what topics are taught. If you haven’t established a personal contact with a member of staff yet, all schools have websites and these can give valuable clues to what pupils will study when. Most schools won’t amend their schemes of work substantially from year to year.

Having said that, reading, including reading for pleasure, is prominent in all UK curriculums. For example, the English National Curriculum states, “The overarching aim for English in the National Curriculum is to promote high standards of language and literacy by equipping pupils with a strong command of the spoken and written language, and to develop their love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment.” This can only be good for booksellers.
4) Understand and define your strengths

Informing yourself about the basic structure of the school system is obviously a good place to start, but finding out about your specific context is also important, because there will be local factors – both positive and negative – that will determine your working relationships with the schools in your area.

SWOT analysis

If you don’t currently engage the education community at all, or even if you already do, once you’ve gathered your research, a simple SWOT analysis can help you identify areas for development and create a strategy for building your business through working with schools. The diagram on the right has been completed with some example strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, but you will obviously have your own.

A crucial aspect of this is ascertaining who your competitors are. When respondents to the 2016 Booksellers’ Association survey were asked where their local schools bought books, many of the same sources came up. The answer from Lucy Chambers of the Hessle Bookshop in Hessle, East Yorkshire, was fairly typical: “Most of [the schools] who don’t use us either order directly from publishers or from Amazon as they can now have credit cards allocated to schools.” Book fair specialists such as Scholastic and the Book People, educational suppliers such as Browns and Peters, and wholesalers such as Gardners were also mentioned frequently.

Meeting other booksellers, hearing about their experiences, their challenges and how they’ve dealt with them, can be an invaluable part of your planning process. The Booksellers’ Association provides a forum for this, via its annual conference and other networking events, as well as at the London Book Fair. It also has a dedicated children’s booksellers group. Further information can be found on www.booksellers.org.uk

If you’re still not sure where to start, give yourself one manageable target, set yourself a deadline for achieving it and go from there.
5) Your catchment

Schools have them and bookshops have them, too, but your catchment area might be bigger than you think. A Booksellers’ Association survey conducted in early 2017 found that, on average, bookshops work with schools up to 13 miles away, but one of the booksellers who responded to the survey was working with a school 45 miles away.

If you’re starting out, one way of establishing an initial catchment area is to contact every school within, say, five miles and tell them you’d like to come in and talk for five minutes at an assembly about some of your favourite books. Not everyone will take you up on your offer, but some will.

Also, remember, many teachers don’t live where they work, so their school may not be in your immediate catchment area, but their home might be. Build your relationship with them on a one-to-one basis and this ultimately creates an opportunity for you to expand your catchment.

Put your postcode into EduBase (see Further Resources on page 25), the register of educational establishments in England and Wales, and you bring up a list of institutions within a certain radius, up to 15 miles. You can also view them on a map. Below is an example showing that there are 55 schools within a five-mile radius of this Midlands village bookshop. If you’re interested in targeting a particular education sector, the ability to filter by type of establishment means you can, for instance, identify all independent schools local to you.

6) How to promote your shop and services

In many respects, marketing to schools is no different from marketing to any other sector or demographic – communications should be targeted, timely and have a clear message – but there are some differences worth noting.

a) Targeting: roles, people, parents

Finding the person or people in a school who can authorise book purchases is obviously critical, but there isn’t one easy answer. Sally Pattle from Far From The Madding Crowd in Linlithgow, West Lothian, sums it up when she says, “We deal with various people depending on the school, from the secretary to the head of year, to individual teachers and the overall head teacher. And one librarian!”

The experience of Rebecca Pirt of Hertford’s Leaf Children’s Bookshop is slightly different. She notes, “I tend to start with the head and then work with the literacy co-ordinator in most primaries. In secondaries I work with the librarian or head of English.”

When it comes to actually placing orders, Fiona Kennedy of the Pitshanger Bookshop in Ealing says, “Sometimes teachers contact us directly. More often it’s a person who is responsible for procurement and the teachers have to put their orders through this central point, where an official purchase order is generated. Increasingly, the teacher or procurement person asks for a quote before they place the order.”
Some schools do publish full lists of job titles and email addresses on their websites, but if they don’t you may have to do some detective work and see what you can glean from online notices and newsletters. The best advice is to do as much research and gather as much intelligence as you can, not just about school staff, but about term dates, which vary from school to school and can be quite different for academies and independent schools, and forthcoming school events which could present an opportunity for you as a bookseller.

Of course, once you’ve identified the person in a particular role at a particular school and built a relationship with them, it’s quite possible you’ll suddenly find out they’ve got a new job somewhere else. This could be a blow, but it needn’t be. As Tereze Brikmame of Tales on Moon Lane in Herne Hill, points out, “Teachers move on from one school to the next. If you’re lucky, if they’ve had a good relationship with you, then when they move on they’ll come back to you. We’ve got some teachers who are now way out of our normal driving distance, but when they get in touch they place big orders.”

“Have a ‘can do’ attitude, and be flexible. Most teachers feel very stressed and over-worked so making them feel you can support them and ease their burden engenders a lot of good will. If they trust you and feel you are a safe pair of hands, they tend to come back.”

Fiona Kennedy, The Pitshanger Bookshop, Ealing

Their involvement and dedication to getting pupils and students to read is first rate and if more retailers did this then my job would be easier in many ways.

“A business like The Bookcase allows you to deal with real people who share a love of books and learning. They know what you want and the ins and outs of your job, and they fit in with your constraints. You can rely on them every time. Literarily amazing!”

Marcus Smith, The Priory Academy School, Lincoln

The school librarian’s perspective

“The teacher’s perspective

“Over the years I have grown tired of faceless corporations shipping books to schools simply for profit. I choose to use The Bookcase [in Lowdham] because they understand that education is more than this.

“Reading is the gateway to all other learning. Students who are unable to read for pleasure are unable to successfully access texts across the curriculum. Reading has a huge impact on concentration, and improves confidence and vocabulary.

“As a school we only rarely use Walter Henry’s to purchase books, although in the past I have ordered in last-minute books from them. We do, however, use them as our bookseller when we hold author events – there are so many ways to bring books alive for young people – and one of the things we gain from that relationship is improved community engagement.”

Lynsey Southern, College Librarian, Bideford College, Bideford
Making the most of existing relationships with parents can also facilitate work with schools, which then in turn increases in-store footfall.

Sanchita Basu De Sarkar of The Children’s Bookshop in London’s Muswell Hill, says, “Parents are often very enthusiastic and if schools have active parent teacher associations [PTAs] they can be instrumental in organising events.” Natasha Radford from the Chicken and Frog Bookshop in Brentwood, Essex, agrees, “especially if the parent is a governor or on the PTA.”

However, Tereze Brikmane sounds a note of caution, saying, “We have had members of PTAs approach us for author events in schools, but it can be a mixed bag, as the parents can’t ensure all the practical aspects of the visit will be catered for. An introduction to the school can be very helpful, though, but where possible work with the school directly after the initial contact.”

“…they’ve had author visits at my son’s primary school, arranged by our local bookshop, and he’s member of a reading group run in school by one of their staff... both encourage his love of reading... this has led to visits to the bookshop to enquire about other titles by the same author or to browse the shelves for similar books.”

Mum, Nottingham

According to Fiona Kennedy from the Pitshanger Bookshop, “The important thing to remember is that every parent who comes into the shop has a child at a school or customers may be teachers themselves.” And Sanchita from The Children’s Bookshop, adds, “If you arrange author events in schools, make sure parents visiting the shop know about the service. Even if they can’t get involved, they’ll often speak to their children’s teachers about getting in touch. A little bit of healthy school rivalry can help!”

Also, remember that your existing customer base is highly likely to include people working in education and promoting your services to them as individuals, rather than school employees, is both a worthwhile end in itself and a way into their institutions. A loyalty scheme, whereby teachers give you their email address in exchange for a discount when they buy books for school or perhaps for themselves as well, is a good way of identifying teachers in the first place and retaining their custom.

There are a number of different routes into teacher training – many teachers train ‘on the job’ in schools – but establishing a connection with a local teacher training provider or engineering a presence for your bookshop at continuing professional development conferences in your area can be productive in terms of establishing relationships with individual teachers, too.

b) Communication channels

So if you’re building your education business, how should you make that initial approach? Sally Pattle of Far From The Madding Crowd says, “For us first contact is usually by email. Either we have an author looking for a school event or they want us to look for titles or author visits.”

However, Cat Anderson, children’s bookseller at the Edinburgh Bookshop, prefers to use traditional methods. “My first approach is always to send a letter to the headteacher. I never do it by email. I basically say, ‘Did you know we give advice on classroom and library books? We also offer free author events. If you want to be considered for one, get in touch.’” She does advise doing as much research as you can first, though, so you can make the letter as relevant to the school as possible.

A letter or a flyer can certainly have impact, but email is very cost-effective and if you’re creating an education mailing list from scratch, Jane Streeter of The Bookcase in Lowdham, Nottinghamshire, says start small. She suggests you identify the 10 nearest primary schools and the 10 nearest secondary schools, then try to find out the names and contact details of the literacy co-ordinator in the primary schools, and the librarians in the secondary schools. Jane has developed such strong relationships with her customers that if she’s
organising an event with a children’s author, many of the primary school bursars on her list are happy to forward an email about it to the school’s parents.

Another effective way of promoting a service to schools, or an event aimed at children, to teachers and parents in your locality is via Caboodle, the National Book Tokens rewards programme, which has 500,000 people on its database, 300,000 of whom are teachers or parents. Upload details of your service or event to the Caboodle website and it will automatically email that information to Caboodle members, based on their postcodes. Research shows that Caboodle members respond very well to local offers, for example a 2017 survey found that an author event would encourage 66% to visit their local bookstore more often. This makes Caboodle a powerful communication channel for raising your business’s community profile, and reaching influencers who can help you build relationships with schools in your area.

As it is for any business, your website is a promotional tool and it makes sense to have a separate section for schools, where you list what you can offer them, whether it’s topic boxes, author events or an advisory service. It’s also good to talk about relevant experience – if you or any of your staff used to be a teacher, say so – and any specialisms or particular interests you have. Your passion for reading and your love of books will appeal to educationalists, and this is the perfect place to highlight that and emphasise how you add value.

You may want to retain flexibility and not publish the discounts you give on your website, but it’s a good idea to have your pricing policy clear in your head and at least say if discounts are available and perhaps where they start. If you run a loyalty scheme for individual teachers or schools or for instance offer reduced price entry to bookshop events if booked via a school, mention it.

Like many bookshops, the Lowdham Bookcase’s website has a separate area for education customers. This not only describes the services it offers, but features a selection of testimonials from teachers it works with regularly. One, from a Nottingham school, reads, “I have no hesitation in recommending this excellent bookshop to anyone who is looking for an efficient and speedy service.” Testimonials can be very powerful because, like most professionals, teachers trust their colleagues, and they can be used in other marketing materials as well.

A Facebook page can be particularly useful for keeping friends of the bookshop, including teachers, up to date with your current activities, especially events, and don’t neglect Twitter. Lots of schools have Twitter accounts and it can be a good way of monitoring what they’re doing, for example finding out about topics, visiting authors or perhaps a book festival they’re holding, so search for the schools you currently work with, and those you want to work with, follow them and proactively retweet them. If a school follows you back, direct messaging also opens up another avenue of communication with it.
c) Timing is everything

Conventional marketing wisdom suggests that contacting teachers during school holidays is pointless, but according to Stewart Morris, campaign manager at Sprint Education, a company which specialises in education marketing, emails sent outside term time will receive just as many opens and only marginally fewer clicks than emails sent during term time. That’s because, just like everyone else, teachers increasingly read email on their mobiles or tablets – some schools give staff a personal tablet for work use – at any hour of the day, not just during working hours when they have a free period and access to a computer.

It’s worth bearing in mind that Sprint’s research suggests Thursday is the best day of the week to send an email, followed by Friday and Monday, with Wednesday and then Tuesday bringing up the rear. On the other hand, Michael McVerry, director of School Mailings, another education marketing company, suggests Tuesdays to Thursdays are the most reliable days for electronic contact with schools. At least they agree Thursday is a good day and that, broadly speaking, emails sent in the morning are likely to be most effective, but the best advice is to work out what works for you.

Most independent booksellers’ schools mailing lists will be relatively small, but you could still do your own simple A/B tests with the schools you contact regularly by splitting your email list into two groups, sending the same message to each group on different days or at different times, comparing the response rates and fine-tuning your email schedule accordingly. Certainly tracking responses and identifying which subject lines get the best reaction is a good idea. Richard Drake of Drake The Bookshop in Stockton-on-Tees does this, so he knows, for instance, that a message with the subject line ‘Work experience’ was opened by 60% of the 34 secondary schools on his mailing list!

It makes sense to plan your contact with schools, setting yourself deadlines that tie in with the school year, for example (see below):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Work with</th>
<th>Services</th>
<th>Contact plan</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village Primary School</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Books, author visits, National Book Tokens prizes</td>
<td>Autumn term update email</td>
<td>Identify authors for autumn term visit</td>
<td>By 20/7/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Primary School</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>Offer storytelling</td>
<td>Tailored email</td>
<td>Ask PTA chair to speak to head</td>
<td>By 1/9/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Secondary School</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>Offer all</td>
<td>Intro letter inc flyer</td>
<td>Research contacts</td>
<td>By 1/9/17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7) Ten-minute checklist

- Research national and local education system and initiatives
- List local target schools
- Research key contacts and dates for target schools
- Follow target schools on Twitter
- Set up Facebook events page
- Decide initial activity focus
- Draw up email schedule
- Draft introductory emails
- Follow up responses
- Re-send introductory emails if necessary
- Confirm activity
- Visit venue, confirm number of pupils, check timings
- Manage author and school or participant expectations
- Order stock – new and back list
- Publicise activity to show other schools what's possible
- Evaluate activity and note future refinements
8) Some easy ideas

- Plan activities to support World Book Day
- Invite groups of students to visit your shop
- Offer to do book-themed assemblies
- Take storytelling sessions into local nurseries and primary schools
- Set up a children’s book group in a local school or in store
- Run a competition for schools – it can be something as simple as designing a bookmark
- Display work from local school children in your window or on a wall if you have space
- Run a book fair in a school to tie in with an event such as a literary festival, anti-bullying week or health and wellbeing focus
- Arrange an author visit to a school – start with a local author who’s also new to school visits
- Get in touch with your local library to see if they might be open to joint events for schools
- Contact your local authority’s school library service to explore how you can work together
- Launch or sponsor a local education-related book award
- Create an A5 flyer for teachers and parents summarising how you work with schools
- Publish a regular newsletter about reading and books for schools or school children
- Set up a loyalty scheme for individual teachers or schools
- Host an open evening for teachers – give them a glass of wine, a short talk on the services you offer and an opportunity to browse
- Produce themed booklists to tie in with school topics
- Launch a book box scheme, complete with gift-wrapping
- Organise a mini literary festival for schools in your area
- Give teachers promotional posters to decorate their classroom or library walls
- Use your relationships with publishers’ reps to get freebies to pass on to teachers and schools
- Contact PTA chairs to offer raffle prizes, book stalls or author events
- Remind schools you can supply National Book Tokens, personalised with their logo if they want, for prizes or rewards
- Consider offering work experience to local secondary school students
- Research national or local literacy initiatives that you might be able to tap into
- Find an experienced bookseller willing to mentor you as you develop your education expertise
- **AND - Get involved with the BA and meet other booksellers**
9) Bookseller profiles

Drake The Bookshop

Drake The Bookshop in Stockton-on-Tees, which is run by Richard Drake and his partner Melanie, has been in business for less than two years, but Richard recognises that if children become interested in books via school, the shop’s customer base will ultimately expand, so they have launched a number of initiatives focused on education.

As an ex-maths teacher, Richard knows the school system, but his contacts aren’t local to the store and contacts, he stresses, are key. In most establishments the school office acts as a gatekeeper. If you call they will usually agree to forward an email message to the right person, but obtaining an individual email address is vital. “If you can get that, it’s the Holy Grail,” says Richard. “Then you can start to form a relationship, even if it’s a one-sided one to start with.”

Richard is upfront and honest with schools. He’s clear he can’t always offer significant discounts. In fact, he says, the discount schools already get mean they could probably supply him with stock and still make a profit. However, he emphasises that he can provide new books and up to date editions, rather than versions that are going out of print often offered by some other suppliers.

And sometimes it’s the small details that can make a difference. For instance, when he recommends a book he will always mention if there’s an Accelerated Reader quiz available for it, because if there is it can open up different budget areas.

The shop has a weekly story-time session for young children and Richard has recently started two book groups, one for key stage 2 and one for key stage 3 children. They meet on Saturdays once a month to read and discuss a book, and have Skyped Lisa Thompson, author of The Goldfish Boy, and Cell 7 author Kerry Drewery. Although these activities don’t take place in school time, they’re the model for what he can offer schools.

Working on the basis that a small monthly fee may be more affordable than a large annual payment, he operates a schools’ subscription service. Every month he personally selects ten up-to-date and relevant titles based on a school’s preferences, which he then introduces at an assembly.

Happy to run a service as a way into schools, every Wednesday afternoon he also takes a selection of books to a local secondary school. Pupils are free to browse and purchase at a discount – manga and graphic novels are popular – and Richard picks up what’s left of the stock on Thursday. “It’s another string to a many–stringed bow,” he says. “They’re all tiny things, but hopefully they build to a bigger business.”

There are plenty of frustrations, though. Having spent a month trying to arrange for a particular author to come to Stockton, Richard discovered that a library supplier in Newcastle had already organised for the same author to visit the area. What made this especially galling was that the author was due to visit Richard’s son’s school! “We want to do as much as we can, but I’m very aware that we need to be patient – patience is important when working with schools,” he concludes.

“I work on the basis that getting anything from schools is a bonus. What I want is to get people through the door and if I get both it’s a win–win.”

Richard Drake, Drake The Bookshop
Newham Bookshop

Like many independents, the Newham Bookshop in East London is at the heart of its community – and it’s been there for almost 40 years. The shop is run as a non-profit and Vivian Archer has been at the helm for a ‘mere’ 30 years, supported in part by a pool of volunteers, some of them retired teachers, who are on hand to help out at events.

The bookshop holds a lot of events and takes a lot of authors into schools, in Newham itself and also further afield in neighbouring boroughs, particularly Redbridge and Waltham Forest. Publishers approach the bookshop to help promote specific titles to school-age children, but it also works with organisations like Authors Aloud UK.

Books for all these events are supplied by the bookshop – its sold-out afternoon with Jacqueline Wilson at a central London hall recently generated advance sales of over 200 signed copies of Wave Me Goodbye – but it’s in this enviable position because it has such a good reputation and such strong relationships. However, Vivian stresses that neither were built overnight.

Many of the events Vivian and her team organise take place around World Book Day, which occupies a central place in the shop’s calendar. The bookshop also works with a local secondary to run an annual ‘big read’. The school chooses a title and gives a copy to every single student and member of staff, including the lunchtime supervisors. “When everyone reads and can share the book, that’s quite amazing,” says Vivian. Again, Newham supplies the books – that’s nearly a thousand copies – and arranges for the students to meet the author. Charlie Higson, Anthony Horowitz and Young Sherlock author Andrew Lane have all visited.

Secondary school pupils come to the bookshop for work experience, too – “I think we owe that to the community” says Vivian – but they need to make a formal application, submit a CV and undergo an interview. “We try to make it a real experience, so the students can learn about books and the book trade. It’s very rewarding and some of our staff have come to us that way,” she adds.

“It’s crucial to build relationships and those relationships are often driven by events. Our reputation has built over the years, but it is years and years of networking.”

Vivian Archer, The Newham Bookshop
Norfolk Children’s Book Centre

There is a sign on the A-road that runs from Aylsham to Cromer, but even so the Norfolk Children’s Book Centre can’t get a lot of passing traffic. However, teachers from across the county and beyond nonetheless make the effort to visit it, because of its emphasis on quality, breadth of its stock and expertise of its staff.

Originally a librarian, Marilyn Brocklehurst has run the centre for over 30 years and has built a national reputation as an education specialist. Her advice to colleagues looking to build their business is, “Get into schools. Show your passion for reading. Wave books around!” The opportunity for independent booksellers is there, because teachers are under pressure and can’t read as widely as they might want to. “Don’t rely on teachers for knowledge, even if they’re the literacy coordinator!” she cautions.

Teachers need to be able to look at books properly, so she offers an approval service. Books collections – sample themes might be mindfulness or key stage 2 picture books – are left in the staffroom for teachers to browse. When they’ve made their choices, any unwanted titles are picked up and the school is invoiced for the rest. Marilyn acknowledges that to offer this service you do need quite a lot of stock, but points out that most independent booksellers have lovely picture books or good fiction, which could be starting points.

Marilyn highlights that books in schools must have a long shelf-life, particularly non-fiction, so consider the stock you offer carefully. It may seem obvious, but atlases need to be up to date – with Brexit looming Marilyn is cautious about the geography textbooks she stocks – and a 1980s book about hospitals will be inappropriate and old-fashioned, because hospitals have changed a lot. Schools also go to the Norfolk Children’s Book Centre for help revamping or setting up their school libraries. Marilyn is committed to this aspect of her work, because, she says, “If you get books into school libraries it will get books into children’s hands and they will become readers. Unfortunately, that’s the only way some children will ever get hold of books.”

However, advising on libraries is a specialist area and she counsels that you should be aware of your own limitations, and make sure you have the knowledge and expertise before you give input. She recommends the School Library Association as a source of information on school libraries. Individual booksellers may not feel membership is appropriate for them personally, but it’s good to be able to refer teachers to it. When funding is an issue – and it so often is – she also directs schools to the Foyle Schools Library Scheme, run by the Foyle Foundation, which gives grants to schools for buying books.

Book fairs are an excellent way of getting into schools, but Marilyn runs them in conjunction with storytelling sessions. She says, “When children come along to the stall later they meet the storyteller, who can talk to them about the story, about reading and about books. It’s not just someone sitting behind a cash box.” She always asks schools to ensure teachers come along and browse as well, though, “because they are modelling enthusiasm for reading.”

“The relationship with schools starts with going into schools and talking about books, but do a good job with one school and the word of mouth will spread.”

Marilyn Brocklehurst, Norfolk Children’s Book Centre
The Bookcase

“The schools side is essential to us,” says Jane Streeter, who owns The Bookcase in Lowdham, a few miles north of Nottingham. “The shop just wouldn’t survive without it.” Education customers make up around 40% of her turnover and she supplies library stock, class sets and sometimes year group sets to a mix of state and private schools at all levels, from pre-school to secondary.

In fact, Jane has been working with schools since she first opened The Bookcase, 20 years ago. At this time a lot of her friends happened to be teachers and they encouraged her to develop a schools supply business – at one point she had a showroom and two drivers. However, she found this took her away from the shop itself so she eventually scaled that side of it back. Now The Bookcase works with 30 to 40 schools, mostly located within a 25-mile radius of the shop, which, she says, “Is just right for us.”

Jane is adamant that a positive attitude is a must for working with schools. “We say yes to everything,” she says, although with one caveat: “We don’t do school book fairs. We leave that to the specialists like Scholastic.” The list of what she does do is long, though, and includes arranging author visits to schools, running reading groups for Year 6 pupils in five local primaries and, although her premises are tiny, encouraging school librarians to bring groups of pupils into the shop.

“We often host small groups of 10 to 12, usually 12 to 14-year-olds and often the less able students,” she explains. “The school might give each one £5 or £10 to spend, and we bribe them with hot chocolate and cake, chat to them about books, and send them away with a goody bag. We want them to have a taste of what a bookshop is like, so that they have had that experience. Of course, they might bring their parents back, but really if even one of them thinks books are for me then it’s worth it.”

Jane also works closely with Nottinghamshire County Council’s Education Library Service, which often forward emails to schools for her, perhaps about an author who is available or a relevant event she’s organising, maybe as part of the Lowdham Book Festival. It is, says Jane, a very mutually supportive, not competitive, relationship. After all, “They’re not trying to sell books and we’re not trying to lend them,” she adds.

The Bookcase also sponsors the Education Library Service’s annual Brilliant Book Award. Each year, local school librarians choose a shortlist of six books. Key stage 3 pupils across the county read them and vote on a winner. “The shortlisted authors are always well disposed to doing school visits, so most of them do two or three in a day. Schools must purchase their copies of the six books from The Bookcase, so we give an extra discount and probably sell around 120 of each title.”

“Very noticeably, not all schools have a qualified librarian any more. The role has been devalued. A lot of school libraries aren’t even open at lunchtime.”

Jane Streeter, The Bookcase
The Edinburgh Bookshop

Last year the Edinburgh Bookshop decided to prioritise building its business with schools – with impressive results. “We took 24 authors into 36 schools and it was very successful,” says children’s bookseller, Cat Anderson. “We’re now working with a number of new schools and seeing a lot more publishers coming to us with big names,” she adds.

Although it could potentially take several hundred pounds at a successful event, ultimately the bookshop doesn’t invest in education for the sales, but to get children reading. “I do lots of preparation before an author visit, I put in a lot of hours, but it’s totally worth it, because I know what impact an author visiting a school can have on children.”

If you’re new to author events in schools, Cat suggests finding a local children’s author who is also new to them, so that you can learn and build your confidence together. The bookshop has developed such good relationships with many of the authors it’s nurtured that it’s often asked to organise the books for events those authors are doing in other parts of Scotland and northern England. It orders from Gardners and has the books delivered direct to the school.

The Edinburgh Bookshop has a good mix of primary and secondary, and state and private, schools in its contacts book. On the difference between the two sectors, Cat says, “The private schools expect to pay for events, so if you offer them an author visit for free they’re very receptive.”

She also adds that, “Private schools tend to be better organised and generate better sales.” This is partly because when private school pupils buy books at an author event or book fair, the cost can usually be debited straight from their parents’ accounts. At state schools it’s more complicated, because parents have to send the money in with their children.

As a former speech and language therapist, as well as a specialist children’s bookseller, Cat knows the educational field well and makes the point that central services to schools provided by local authorities have declined dramatically over recent years, which creates opportunities for booksellers to offer their expertise. She does acknowledge that working with schools is hard, and you can sometimes get a negative response or no response at all, and sometimes events don’t go as well as you’d like them to, but, she concludes, “Frustrating as it is for us, you’ve to remember what teachers are up against.”

“Teachers often don’t know much about books, particularly new books, so if you’re selling to schools you need to explain the teaching opportunities to them – tell them what the themes are, give them lesson plans if you can.”

Cat Anderson, The Edinburgh Bookshop
Walter Henry’s Bookshop

“Teachers come to us because we can talk to them about books, we can deliver, and we deal with problems if there are any,” explains Fiona Chope, who owns Walter Henry’s Bookshop in Bideford, Devon. The town has one large secondary school with around 2000 pupils and Fiona has a good relationship with staff there. “We stock the recommended texts for GCSE and A level, and make sure the study guides we have are the right ones for the exam boards they use.” To find out which exam boards and syllabuses a school is taking she recommends simply calling the school office.

She also supplies several other local schools – most seem free to purchase books from whatever supplier they choose and she notes that certain teachers actively prefer to buy books from independent booksellers. When she supplies the books for author events at schools, though, she also takes along a banner she had made with the bookshop’s name on it, because then, “You’re a presence and it gets you known in the community.”

As well as state schools, Fiona recommends approaching private schools as well, because they seem to have a little more flexibility on budgets. At author events, private school pupils are also more likely to have money with them, so you can potentially sell 30 copies of a title.

Schools often ask Fiona to take World Book Day books into schools, too, but she resists this. “I would prefer it if they came into the shop with their parents. If I go out to schools, they won’t,” she says. However, her takings do go up significantly in the few weeks after World Book Day, because, when children come in to use their World Book Day vouchers they buy other books, and their parents buy adult books, too.

Up-to-date local intelligence and making every opportunity count are the cornerstones of Fiona’s strategy for selling to schools. The Appledore Book Festival, for example, is a local literary festival, which runs a parallel education outreach programme taking authors into schools across north Devon, so Fiona always makes sure she knows which authors are participating and that she has a good selection of their books in stock.

However, she is frank about the tight finances of supplying schools. She offers schools a 10% discount, which she acknowledges is controversial given the discounts booksellers receive on educational books, and she admits she sometimes questions how much profit the bookshop makes, but, she says, “Working with schools is a really good way of getting yourself out there and getting involved in the community, and some of the events are actually really enjoyable.”
10) Further resources

Booksellers’ Association
www.booksellers.org.uk
Back copies of the BA’s newsletter, Bookselling Essentials, are a useful source of advice for booksellers, details on events and contacts within the BA.

EduBase
www.education.gov.uk/edubase/home.xhtml
A database of schools in England and Wales

Schools Web
www.schoolswebdirectory.co.uk
A directory of schools and colleges in England, Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland

Scottish Schools Online
www.scottishschoolsonline.gov.uk
Lists schools in Scotland

Northern Irish Department for Education
www.education-ni.gov.uk
Lists different types of schools in Northern Ireland

National Curriculum for England
www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum
Information about the English National Curriculum

Education Scotland
www.education.gov.scot
Information about the Scottish education system, including its Curriculum for Excellence

Learning Wales
www.learning.gov.wales
Information about the Welsh education system, including the Welsh curriculum

Department for Education Northern Ireland
www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/statutory-curriculum
Information about the Northern Irish education system, including the statutory curriculum

School Guide A-Z Jargon Buster
www.schoolguide.co.uk/blog/school-guides-a-z-jargon-buster
Education is riddled with acronyms and jargon — there isn’t one go-to place for explanations, but this is a starting point plus lots of school websites have their own guides

National Literacy Trust
www.literacytrust.org.uk
A national charity, which campaigns and carries out research on literacy – good for information on children’s reading habits and current initiatives
UK Literacy Association
www.ukla.org
Promotes literacy in education and runs professional development initiatives

School Library Association
www.sla.org.uk
Promotes reading and learning, and supports everyone working in school libraries – a member organisation, but some resources are open-access

Local authority library services
www.sla.org.uk/schools-library-services-uk.php
A list courtesy of the School Library Association

Centre for Literacy in Primary Education
www.clpe.org.uk
Offers free lists of, for example, phonics books or books on an environmental theme – has a primary focus

Authors Aloud UK
www.authorsalouduk.co.uk
Specialises in arranging author visits to schools

Contact an Author
www.contactanauthor.co.uk
Lists authors available for events plus advice on booking an author

Scattered Authors’ Society
www.scatteredauthors.org
A list of authors willing to visit schools

Book Trust
www.booktrust.org.uk/programmes/arranging-an-author-visit
Good advice on arranging author visits

The Society of Authors
www.societyofauthors.org/Groups/Childrens-Writers-and-Illustrators/CWIG-Resources
Various useful resources, including a guide for schools organising an author visit highlighting issues for schools to consider

Federation of Children’s Book Groups
www.fcbg.org.uk
Promotes reading for pleasure by bringing children and books together

Sprint Education
www.sprint-education.co.uk
Its blog is good for suggestions on marketing to schools and education news updates

School Mailings
www.schoolmailings.com/marketing-resources
Has some useful infographics and marketing materials
Foyle Schools Library Scheme
www.foylefoundation.org.uk
Makes grants of between £1,000 and £10,000 to schools, mostly primaries, for buying books

Accelerated Reader Bookfinder
www.arbookfind.co.uk
Database of titles which have Accelerated Reader book quizzes

World Book Day
www.worldbookday.com
Details of this annual event, including resources for booksellers

Caboodle
caboodle.nationalbooktokens.com/booksellers
A direct marketing tool, which emails relevant service and event information to teachers and parents in your locality

National Book Tokens
www.nationalbooktokens.com/learning
Includes a section for schools highlighting the benefits of National Book Tokens

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www.batch.co.uk
www.facebook.com/thebooksellersassociation
www.twitter.com/BAbooksellers
www.twitter.com/IndieBound_uk
www.linkedin.com/company/the-booksellers-association