Managing Education Finance should be easy

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All-in-One vs Best-of-Breed
Finance Software in Schools

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A balanced, practical guide for schools and multi-academy trusts

School finance has never been simple. Finance teams are expected to manage increasingly complex budgets, tighter scrutiny, rising costs, and greater accountability - often with limited resource and time.

Against this backdrop, the technology that underpins finance operations matters more than ever. One of the most common - and most debated - questions facing schools and multi-academy trusts is whether to adopt an **all-in-one finance system** or move towards a **best-of-breed ecosystem**.

This is not a debate with a single "right" answer. Both approaches exist for good reasons, and both continue to serve schools successfully. The challenge lies in understanding the trade-offs clearly and choosing the model that best fits an organisation's culture, capacity, and appetite for change.

How education finance systems arrived here

For many years, finance software used in schools was developed specifically for the education sector. Products such as **PS Financials**, now part of **IRIS**, were designed to bring budgeting, purchasing, and accounting together under a single umbrella.

This approach reflected how schools were viewed at the time: fundamentally different from commercial organisations, with unique funding models, governance requirements, and reporting expectations. Purpose-built systems provided reassurance and familiarity, and for many schools they still do.

While education software largely evolved along this path, the commercial sector moved in a different direction. Over the last decade, businesses have increasingly adopted cloud-based, API-driven ecosystems, where specialist tools connect seamlessly rather than one system attempting to do everything.

Education now sits between these two worlds - and that tension shapes much of today's decision-making.

How education finance systems arrived here

What is meant by an all-in-one finance system?

An all-in-one finance system typically aims to deliver:

- Budgeting and forecasting
- Purchasing and procurement
- Core accounting and reporting

All within a single platform, supplied by one vendor, under one contract.

For many schools, this offers immediate reassurance. There is a clear structure, a single supplier relationship, and a defined way of working across the whole finance function.

Importantly, all-in-one systems are often built explicitly around education-specific processes. They tend to reflect familiar terminology, budget structures, and compliance expectations, which can reduce the learning curve for finance teams and senior leaders alike.

However, many all-in-one platforms have evolved through acquisitions or white-labelling rather than being built as one cohesive product from the ground up. As a result, some modules may be stronger than others, and innovation can be constrained by the need to move all parts forward together.

What does "best-of-breed" actually mean in practice?

A **best-of-breed approach** starts from a different assumption:
that no single supplier can realistically be the best at budgeting, purchasing, accounting, reporting, and automation all at once.

Instead, schools select:

- A best-in-class accounting platform
- A specialist education budgeting tool
- A dedicated purchase-to-pay solution
- Optional reporting and analytics tools

These systems are then connected via APIs so that data flows securely and automatically between them.
In education, this often means combining commercial-grade accounting software with education-specific budgeting tools, while using procurement platforms built solely around purchasing efficiency and control.

Supplier relationships and support models

One of the most frequently cited advantages of all-in-one systems is having a single supplier relationship.

For some organisations, this simplicity is genuinely valuable. It reduces the number of contracts to manage and can feel more controllable, particularly where internal capacity is limited or governance structures favour consolidation.

That said, even within a single supplier, support is rarely handled by one universal team. **Budgeting**, **purchasing**, and **accounting queries** are typically triaged to different specialists. While the "front door" is singular, the experience behind it is often modular anyway.

With **best-of-breed**, this separation is simply more explicit. Each supplier owns a clearly defined part of the process, and issues are handled by teams who specialise exclusively in that function. For many schools, this clarity can actually improve accountability and resolution times.

Familiarity, continuity, and confidence

One of the strongest - and most legitimate - advantages of **all-in-one systems** is familiarity.

Many education finance professionals have worked with the same platforms for years. That continuity brings tangible benefits:

- Lower training overheads
- Easier onboarding of new staff
- Well-established processes
- Reduced anxiety during audits or inspections

In a sector where finance teams are often stretched, familiarity can be a stabilising force. A system that is well understood may not be perfect, but it is predictable - and predictability has real value.

Best-of-breed ecosystems, by contrast, often require a greater willingness to change how things are done. While the long-term benefits can be significant, the short-term adjustment should not be underestimated.
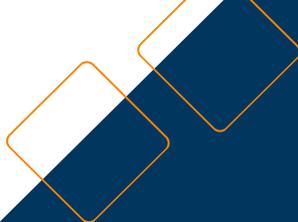
User experience and access

Historically, all-in-one systems held an advantage in terms of user access, particularly around single sign-on.

That gap has narrowed considerably.

Modern platforms - including ecosystems built around **Xero**, **Sage Intacct**, or **Iplicit** - now support single sign-on across connected applications. From a user's perspective, logging into a best-of-breed environment can feel just as seamless as accessing a monolithic system.

The difference today is less about access and more about how intuitive each module feels once users are inside it.

Flexibility, phasing, and change management

Where the two approaches diverge most clearly is in **how change can be managed**.

All-in-one systems often require schools to adopt budgeting, purchasing, and accounting together, or within a tightly defined framework. This can be beneficial for organisations that prefer a clear, single transition point and are comfortable with a "big-bang" approach.

However, it can also be restrictive. Schools may find themselves replacing systems they are happy with simply because one area no longer meets their needs.

Best-of-breed ecosystems tend to support phased change, which can align more naturally with school finance cycles:
- Accounting and purchasing may move together
- Budgeting may follow later, once a financial year is complete
- Reporting tools can be added when capacity allows

This flexibility can reduce risk and spread the implementation workload across time, but it does require confidence in managing multiple moving parts.

Cost and operational overhead

Cost comparisons are rarely straightforward.
All-in-one systems have historically been:

- User-based
- Partly server-hosted
- Dependent on IT teams for access changes and upgrades

This can create **hidden costs** in internal time, infrastructure, and maintenance.

Best-of-breed platforms are typically:

- Cloud-native
- Subscription-based
- Continuously updated

Over time, this often proves more **cost-effective** operationally, though it does require careful contract management across suppliers.

Purchasing and procurement depth

Procurement is one area where specialisation often delivers clear advantages.

Dedicated purchase-to-pay platforms such as **Planergy** focus entirely on purchasing control and value for money, offering features such as:

- Multi-supplier punch-out
- Approval workflows
- Budget visibility at point of purchase
- Supplier catalogues and savings analysis
- Invoice OCR and automation

All-in-one systems do provide procurement functionality, and for some schools this is sufficient. However, depth is often limited compared to specialist platforms, particularly where trusts are actively trying to drive savings and standardisation.

Accounting capability and usability
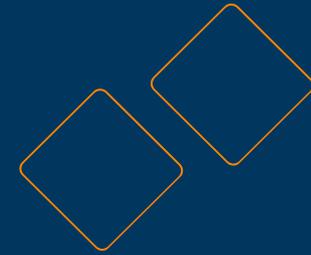
Commercially developed accounting platforms adapted for education have continued to raise expectations around usability and automation.

They benefit from:
- Years of commercial innovation
- Intuitive interfaces
- Strong audit trails
- Features such as bank feeds and automated reconciliations

Platforms like Xero, Iplicit, and Sage Intacct are built with accountants in mind first and then tailored for education, rather than designed solely within the education context.

That said, some schools value the education-specific structure and terminology of all-in-one systems, even if they sacrifice some **usability** or **flexibility** in the process.

Reporting, insight, and decision-making

Reporting is an increasingly important differentiator.

Many legacy systems still struggle with:
- Meaningful balance sheets
- Cash-flow forecasting
- Board-level visual reporting

Best-of-breed ecosystems allow schools to layer in specialist reporting tools, moving finance beyond compliance into insight and strategy.

However, for some organisations, simpler reporting aligned tightly to statutory requirements is exactly what is needed - and all-in-one systems can deliver that reliably.

Roadmaps, stability, and pace of change

All-in-one vendors typically offer a single, coordinated roadmap.

For schools that prioritise stability, this can be reassuring. Changes tend to be planned well in advance and rolled out in a controlled manner.

Best-of-breed suppliers develop independently, with tightly focused teams. This often results in **faster innovation** and **quicker response** to user feedback, but also requires schools to be comfortable with more frequent, incremental change.

Neither approach is inherently better - they simply reflect different priorities.

Choosing the right model

Ultimately, this is not a question of old versus new, or education versus commercial.

It is a question of **organisational readiness.**

All-in-one systems often suit schools and trusts that:
- Value certainty and familiarity
- Prefer a single supplier relationship
- Have limited capacity for phased change
- Want systems built explicitly around education finance

Best-of-breed ecosystems often suit organisations that:
- Are comfortable managing multiple suppliers
- Want deeper functionality in specific areas
- Prefer phased, modular change
- Are thinking long-term about flexibility and resilience

Final thoughts

This debate is not about ideology. **It is about fit.**

Schools no longer need to accept limitations simply because a system is "education-specific", but nor should they feel compelled to adopt complexity they are not ready to manage.

The best choice is the one that aligns with a school or trust's confidence, capacity, and strategic direction - both now and in the years ahead.

Understanding the trade-offs honestly is the most important step of all.

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