Buyer's Guide: Class Change Systems for the Education Sector (2025)

1. Introduction

In schools, colleges, and universities, managing the flow of the day is crucial. Class change systems — also known as school bell or class change automation systems — signal the start and end of lessons, breaks, and assemblies, helping maintain structure, punctuality, and safety.

Today's systems range from simple programmable tone generators to networked, IP-based solutions that integrate with PA systems, fire alarms, and emergency notifications.

This guide will help education leaders, site managers, and IT teams choose the most efficient, cost-effective, and future-proof class change system for their premises.

2. What Is a Class Change System?

A class change system automates the audible or visual signals that mark scheduled times throughout the school day.
Typical systems use bells, tones, or pre-recorded announcements activated automatically via a timer, software scheduler, or network trigger.

Modern systems can integrate with:

- PA / Public Address systems
- Fire alarm and lockdown systems
- Network clocks or IP-based scheduling software
- Digital signage or visual alerting for inclusive environments

3. Benefits of a Modern Class Change System

Benefit	Description
Improved Punctuality	Ensures lessons start and end on time across all areas.
Operational Efficiency	Reduces the need for manual bell ringing or timekeeping by staff.
Consistency	Uniform signals across multiple buildings or campuses.
Integration	Connects with existing PA, clock, or fire systems for seamless control.
Flexibility	Easily adjust timetables for special events, exam schedules, or half days.
Safety and Communication	Can double as an emergency alert or lockdown system.
Reduced Maintenance	Digital or networked systems require minimal upkeep compared to mechanical timers.

4. Positives and Negatives

Aspect	Positives	Negatives
Functionality	Automated, reliable, and consistent	Requires technical configuration and updates
Cost	Saves time and resources long term	Higher upfront cost than manual bells
Integration	Can link with PA, fire, or security systems	Compatibility issues with older infrastructure
Flexibility	Easily adapt schedules	Overly complex systems can be difficult for staff to use
Maintenance	Low ongoing maintenance for digital systems	May require IT or facilities support for troubleshooting
Scalability	Expandable across multi-site campuses	Networked systems depend on stable connectivity

5. New System vs. Using Existing Equipment

Option	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages / Requirements
Install a New System	Full replacement with a modern IP-based or digital system	- Latest technology and functionality - Better reliability and control - Integration with emergency and PA systems - User-friendly software interface	- Higher upfront cost - May require new cabling and speakers - Staff training and setup time
Utilise Existing Equipment	Use current speakers, amplifiers, or timers with a new controller or interface	- Lower cost if existing hardware is functional - Reduced installation time - Minimises site disruption	- Must assess compatibility of legacy hardware - May require firmware updates or adapters - Functionality may be limited (no network control or scheduling software) - Potentially shorter lifespan of reused components

What Using Existing Equipment Requires

To reuse existing infrastructure effectively:

1. Audit Current Equipment — Identify all speakers, amplifiers, cabling, and control units.

2. Check Compatibility — Confirm voltage, impedance, and communication protocols with potential new controllers.
3. Upgrade Interfaces — Use signal converters or adapters if necessary (e.g., analogue-to-IP).
4. Software Integration — Ensure legacy systems can accept scheduling or tone triggers from modern software.
5. Testing and Certification — Verify system performance after integration and ensure it complies with school safety standards.

In some cases, retrofitting a modern controller onto an existing system offers a cost-effective “hybrid” approach — blending old hardware with new smart controls.

6. Key Questions to Ask Suppliers

System Functionality

1. Can the system automate multiple daily schedules (e.g. class times, breaks, assemblies)?
2. Does it allow different tones or messages for different events?
3. Can it be controlled remotely via PC, tablet, or network login?
4. Can it integrate with our PA, fire alarm, or lockdown systems?

Compatibility and Installation

5. Can the new system use our existing speakers or cabling?
6. What changes or upgrades would be needed for compatibility?
7. Is installation carried out by qualified engineers familiar with school environments?
8. Will installation disrupt lessons or require after-hours work?

Costs and Support

9. What are the setup and installation costs?
10. Are there any ongoing licence or maintenance fees?
11. What is the warranty period, and what does it cover?
12. Do you offer remote support or software updates as part of the service?

User Experience and Training

13. Is the system easy for school administrators to operate?
14. Do you provide on-site training or online tutorials?
15. Can schedules and tones be changed quickly without technical expertise?

Futureproofing

16. Is the system scalable for future extensions or new buildings?
17. Will it support future integrations (e.g. IP speakers, digital signage)?
18. How often do you update your software, and how is support handled long-term?

7. Best Practices for Choosing a Class Change System

1. Conduct a Site Audit
   Assess your current infrastructure, including speakers, amplifiers, and control systems.
2. Define Requirements Clearly
   Consider the number of zones, buildings, and schedule variations.

3. Prioritise Ease of Use
   Choose a system that non-technical staff can easily manage.
4. Future-Proof Your Investment
   Opt for open standards and network-compatible systems.
5. Plan Integration Early
   Work with suppliers who can coordinate with your IT, facilities, and fire alarm contractors.
6. Request Demonstrations
   See the system in action before committing — especially software interfaces.
7. Check Compliance
   Ensure the system meets DfE guidance and safety standards for use in education environments.

8. Typical Costs (UK 2025 Estimates)

System Type	Typical Cost (excl. VAT)	Description
Basic programmable bell system	£800 – £1,500	Single-building, standalone timer unit
Networked digital class change system	£2,000 – £5,000	Multi-zone system with software control
IP-based integrated PA/class change	£5,000 – £10,000+	Fully networked, scalable across campus
Retrofit using existing speakers	£1,000 – £3,000	Controller upgrade using current infrastructure

9. Summary

A modern class change system is a worthwhile investment that improves punctuality, efficiency, and communication in educational settings.

When deciding between a new installation and upgrading existing equipment, weigh the cost savings against functionality and future flexibility. A fully networked system may cost more initially but will deliver better integration, easier management, and longer-term value.

Key Takeaways

- Assess your site's infrastructure and compatibility early.
- Prioritise systems that are reliable, easy to operate, and scalable.
- Ask detailed questions about integration, maintenance, and training.
- Choose a provider experienced in the education sector and certified to install in public environments