

Written evidence submitted by Action Tutoring

Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils

It was a pleasure to meet with Mr Walker on Tuesday 7th February. We met in my capacity as CEO of Action Tutoring, an education charity and accredited Tuition Provider with the National Tutoring Programme. Mr Walker asked us to submit evidence to this inquiry about our experiences working with disadvantaged pupils, which I'm delighted to do.

Introduction

By way of background, Action Tutoring is a registered charity and our mission is to support pupils facing disadvantage. We partner with state schools across the country to deliver structured, impactful tuition programmes using high quality, trained volunteer tutors. We particularly work with those eligible for the pupil premium at risk of not achieving national standards in SATs at the end of primary school and at secondary school, with those at risk of not achieving at least a grade 4 in their English or maths GCSEs. By enabling pupils to achieve these crucial benchmarks at a key juncture in their education, we open up doors to further education, employment or training.

Action Tutoring existed long before the National Tutoring Programme, having registered as a charity in 2012 and was founded on the basis of making the many benefits of tuition, which is well known to have a strong and compelling evidence base¹, available to those that wouldn't otherwise afford it. Since our inception, we have delivered tutoring to over 26,000 pupils. In 2021-22 alone we supported 6,159 pupils with 586 receiving tutoring in both English and maths. We operate from eight main hubs: London, Brighton, Bristol, Sheffield, Birmingham, Nottingham, Liverpool and Sheffield. Through our online tutoring model we are no longer solely focused on urban areas and increasingly are partnering with schools in a much wider geography, currently including Chesterfield, Rotherham, Portsmouth and Corby.

Our pupils and programmes

This year, 72% of our pupils are eligible for the pupil premium, a slight increase from last year (69%). This compares to 28% of all pupils in England's state schools. For those not eligible for the pupil premium, schools have confirmed that 96% of them would not otherwise have access to private tuition.

Most of our tutoring programmes are delivered outside of school hours, often as a breakfast club or at the end of the school day. A dedicated programme coordinator supports schools to engage pupils, manage tutors and monitor their quality. Tutors use structured resources, tailored to our cohorts and developed by curriculum experts.

The causes of low attendance

In line with national trends, we have seen a dip in attendance on our programmes compared to pre-pandemic years, but we are identifying ways of improving this. We know that there are many reasons

¹ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/one-to-one-tuition>

why attendance nationally has dipped, many of which others would be better placed to comment on including: poor mental health, illness including long term illness, fear of illness (e.g. vulnerable family members). In addition disadvantaged pupils can often face challenges of more chaotic home lives or factors such as additional caring responsibilities.

However, from our work, we believe a significant additional factor currently affecting national attendance is the attainment gap that has only widened through the pandemic². When pupils are struggling academically, which many disadvantaged pupils are in particular post pandemic, it can become a vicious cycle of not wanting to attend school for fear of finding it difficult, feeling demoralised, feeling left behind and lacking confidence to engage in the classroom. We believe that the National Tutoring Programme, targeted at those that need it most, can be a significant tool to help overcome this particular challenge affecting attendance.

Engagement with tutoring

Our attendance figures on our programmes are slightly lower than pre pandemic, following national trends showing a dip in attendance. It has been noticeable in our data that our attendance figures are even lower specifically for our pupil premium cohort.

For our primary school cohort, in the autumn term 2022, attendance at Action Tutoring sessions was 82% for pupil premium pupils and 86% for non pupil premium pupils, with the vast majority of sessions taking place outside of the school day (before school or after school rather than during the regular school day).

In the same term, attendance at sessions in secondary schools was 66% for pupil premium pupils and 72% for non pupil premium pupils, again with sessions happening outside of the regular school day. Our overall disadvantaged attendance gap widened slightly, by 1 percentage point, on the previous autumn. Primary school pupils attended at the same rate regardless of whether the sessions with their tutor were delivered face to face or via an online platform (with the pupil on the school premises in both scenarios). However, in secondary schools, attendance was 65% for pupils having tutoring online compared with 72% for face-to-face sessions.

Schools frequently tell us that, alongside driving important academic achievement, our programmes help to build pupils' confidence and motivation, in turn playing a key role in their engagement in the classroom. For many pupils who are still struggling to catch up post covid, feeling left behind can become a dangerous spiral for disengagement in school. This is one of the reasons we commend the Government for introducing the National Tutoring Programme and believe that it can be a powerful tool for supporting re-engagement with learning and building confidence, as well as ultimately delivering academic results for pupils.

How our programmes benefit disadvantaged pupils

² <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/covid-19-and-disadvantage-gaps-in-england-2021/>

We know that our programmes drive results. In 2021-22, our primary pupils (eligible for pupil premium and considered by their school at risk of not achieving national standards) achieved 8 percentage points above the national average for disadvantaged pupils³, demonstrating that with the right intervention and support, it is possible to narrow the attainment gap. Furthermore, we know that achieving this crucial benchmark at primary school sets pupils on a strong trajectory and a more confident start at secondary school.

We saw a similar trend in our results with our maths GCSE cohort. Nationally, only 53% of disadvantaged pupils achieved a level 4 or above in their maths GCSE. For the Action Tutoring cohort (again disadvantaged and considered at risk of not reaching a level 4), 72% were able to achieve a grade 4 or above in their maths GCSE. We know that achieving this sets them on the right path, meaning they are far more likely to succeed in further education, employment or training.

A deputy headteacher at a London primary school recently shared with us: *“Our children have gained so much confidence and enjoyment of maths thanks to Action Tutoring. Children talk so positively about their sessions and we have had very positive feedback from parents. We can see the children making positive progress in their sessions and the impact it has on their work in the classroom.”* The correlation between the tutoring sessions and engagement in the classroom is key to see here, enabled by the crucial confidence and self-efficacy building that tailored, impactful tutoring can provide.

Another headteacher commented, *“The real impact is in the children’s confidence and attitudes. When they realise the link between the tutoring and their in-class learning they love that they’ve had a heads up and hit the ground running. This makes them more likely to put their hand up and ask for help, and more confident to take risks and challenge themselves.”* As with the previous quotation, we see again here the clear link between tutoring building confidence and classroom engagement, which can drive attendance at school.

Effective strategies for driving engagement

Many schools chose to run our programmes as part of a breakfast club programme, which provides a good incentive for pupils to attend. This serves the dual purpose of ensuring they are well set up for the day with a healthy breakfast, whilst also giving them valuable additional academic support. We have found this particularly successful with Year 6 pupils in primary schools.

With over 10 years of on the ground delivery experience, we know that driving attendance for disadvantaged pupils is not easy. Establishing a strong relationship with the tutor, enjoyment of sessions and the pupil rapidly seeing the benefit through sensing that they are building self efficacy are all critical factors to the success of pupil engagement, attendance and ultimately outcomes. However, we have also seen schools implement many different tactics to drive attendance on our programmes including the following that have been particularly successful:

³ https://actiontutoring.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Action-Tutoring-Impact-Report-2018_2019-v5.pdf

- Drinks and snacks offered as part of the tutoring session. This also helps to aid concentration if pupils arrive hungry.
- Letters home to parents, text reminders to parents and parent information sessions about the tutoring and its benefits.
- Incentives for pupils such as vouchers or free tickets to the end of year prom if they attend the majority of their tutoring sessions.
- Pizza parties at the end of the programme.
- Award ceremony at the end of the programme or presentation of certificates in assembly.
- Reminders earlier in the school day e.g. in form time about the tutoring session and/or picking them up from their last lesson to take them straight there.
- Integrate it into their positive behaviour management system such as gaining points for their 'house' through attendance.

In addition to efforts by the school, the Action Tutoring model includes a dedicated Programme Coordinator for each programme and one of the key remits of their role is to drive attendance on the programmes and engage pupils. Activities they undertake include:

- Inductions with pupils before the tutoring begins, ensuring they understand what the programme entails and how they can benefit.
- Getting to know pupils, ensuring that the relationship with their tutor is working and supporting both pupil and tutor with any issues including extra resources that might be needed.
- Following up with schools on attendance, making sure schools know which pupils aren't attending and agreeing a joint approach for engaging them.
- Supporting schools with snacks or other incentives to attend the programme.

The programme coordinator role comes at a cost to Action Tutoring but has proved extremely effective. Our programme used to run without this role, but following its introduction, we saw attendance rates rise by over 10%. We recognise the efforts required by schools to drive attendance require staff time and often some budget, which isn't always easy with the pressures teachers and school budgets are facing. However, the investment of just a small amount of money towards things like snacks or a voucher reward at the end of the programme have proved to have an impact on driving attendance and ultimately results.

Conclusion

To conclude, we believe that there is a strong link between pupil confidence, underperformance and attendance. For a child or young person, feeling left behind, constantly on the back foot, embarrassed to ask for help, can fuel a cycle of not wanting to attend school. Evidence shows that disadvantaged pupils have been particularly affected by the pandemic, with the attainment gap now at its widest in a decade. We believe that continuing to invest in supporting the most vulnerable to catch up, ensuring that they are given confidence, self-belief and the tools to succeed in the classroom, is critical for helping to break the cycle of low attendance rates currently seen.

Recommendation

Given this, we would urge the Government to ensure that the National Tutoring Programme reaches those that most need it, namely those eligible for the pupil premium. We recommend that the Government invests in embedding the programme for the long-term in the UK education system, to narrow and even eliminate the attainment gap. Our evidence as well as the wider evidence shows that tutoring can be truly transformative for individual lives, building confidence, motivation, improving attitudes to learning and ultimately driving results. At scale, which the National Tutoring Programme can provide, that has the potential to narrow the attainment gap, helping to break cycles of persistent low attendance and build a generation of confident young people, equipped with the academic qualifications they need to succeed. How such programmes are delivered is crucially important. Time and effort is needed to engage pupils and their families; they need to understand the benefits and at an early stage begin to feel their confidence building, seeing the effect on their classroom learning. A collective approach, through a partnership between the tutoring provider and the school, can be a powerful joined up effort not just to support the pupil to achieve crucial grades, but to engage them more broadly in school and in learning.

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