

Public Accounts Committee Inquiry into Education Recovery in Schools

Written evidence submitted by Action Tutoring

Introduction

Action Tutoring is pleased to submit evidence to this valuable inquiry. We have been an accredited tuition partner with the National Tutoring Programme (NTP) since its inception. Established as a charity in 2012, we have been providing tuition to disadvantaged pupils through partnerships with schools across the country for over a decade. When school closures first happened in March 2020, we were at the forefront of calls for a thorough recovery plan for education, advocating for the introduction of the NTP, which included giving evidence to the Education Select Committee in June 2020 about our work and tutoring model.

Fundamentally, we believe that the NTP has the potential to have a transformational impact on pupils facing disadvantage in the UK, not only enabling education recovery but playing a key role in helping to narrow the UK's attainment gap. However, for this to be achieved and for the NTP to realise its full value, we believe improvements and reforms are needed to target it at those who need it most and to ensure it leaves a lasting legacy.

About Action Tutoring

Established in 2012, Action Tutoring is an education charity that provides high-quality, structured English and maths tutoring to young people facing disadvantage. We work in partnership with state schools across England. It supports underperforming disadvantaged pupils, with the majority in receipt of Pupil Premium, through either in-person or online tutoring delivery to increase their subject knowledge, confidence, and learning skills.

Action Tutoring recruits and trains high-quality volunteers. Our programme uses structured resources developed by curriculum experts to support pupils academically. Coordination of our programmes is a critical part of our model and offer to schools, to ensure the quality of delivery, engage pupils and ease the organisational burden on schools. All volunteer tutors are taken through relevant safeguarding checks before being paired with pupils in partner schools. Since our founding, a total of 11,500 volunteer tutors have supported over 26,000 primary and secondary school pupils across England and we are on track to support at least a further 6,000 pupils this academic year.¹

Detailed evidence

1. Covid-19 impact on education

1.1 The Covid-19 pandemic marked a seismic shift in education, with schools on multiple lockdowns and pupils losing out on their education. As an NTP Tuition partner for the government's catch-up and recovery initiative, Action Tutoring scaled up to triple in size from 2019-20 pupil numbers and switched many of its programmes to online and home-based delivery to ensure more disadvantaged pupils received access to learning. Nevertheless, the impact of the pandemic on education continues to this day.

Widest attainment gap in a decade

1.2 The academic attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers is now at its widest in ten years at both primary² and secondary³ levels. The DfE findings are based on performance in exams at key stage 2 (SATs) and key stage 4 (GCSEs) in 2022, following two years of education disruption caused by Covid. The attainment gap was broadening prior to the pandemic; however, learning loss during lockdowns and growing inequalities have worsened the situation.

1.3 Last summer, nationally 59% of pupils attained the expected standards in SATs, down from 65% in pre-pandemic 2019. Disadvantaged pupils make up one-third of those taking SATs and only 43% of them met the attainment target as compared to 65% of non-disadvantaged pupils.² The attainment gap opens before pupils start school and widens throughout their education. Data shows that only 11% of pupils who don't reach national standards by the end of primary go on to excel in GCSEs.¹³ These pupils aren't less able, they simply have less access to the tools and resources that will help them to reach their potential.

1.4 An Economic Endowment Foundation and Teacher Tapp report found evidence that disadvantage gaps for maths widened since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. On average, across Years 2 to 6, the maths gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers saw an increase of between 4% to 17% in the pre-COVID-19 disadvantage gap. The estimate suggests an increase in the gap for maths of around one month's progress.¹³

1.5 Studies have shown how passing English and maths GCSEs in particular is linked to better outcomes in progressing through education, training and employment. However, pupils classified as disadvantaged are already far less likely than others to achieve this benchmark.

1.6 Even before the pandemic, a disadvantaged pupil aged 11 was, on average, nine months behind their non-disadvantaged peers in terms of learning. Pupils who were persistently disadvantaged were a further three months behind.¹⁸ The disadvantage gap index has grown to 3.23, up from 2.91 in 2019.¹⁴

Lost learning

1.7 According to the recent COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study, four in five pupils believe their education has been negatively impacted by school closures and about half say they have been unable to catch up with learning lost during the lockdowns.⁴ The study also found that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were most affected by lost learning during the pandemic: missing more school time, less likely to attend classes online and less likely to be able to access online teaching.

1.8 Many young people feel they have fallen behind due to the pandemic, with 36% saying they have fallen behind their peers. 37% of those at state schools said they had fallen behind their classmates – more than double the figure for independent school students. Young people from ethnic minorities were more likely to be concerned they had fallen behind their classmates due to pandemic disruption.⁴

1.9 On return to fully opened schools, lost learning in the 2020-21 academic year was around 50 per cent higher for disadvantaged pupils than for non-disadvantaged pupils.¹⁶ This has contributed to a growth in educational inequality even from 2020 to 2021.¹⁷

1.10 There were a number of regional disparities in the level of learning loss. Pupils in the North East, Yorkshire, and the Humber, as well as the East and West Midlands, experienced the greatest learning losses. Learning losses are greater for non-disadvantaged primary-aged pupils in areas with a high level of disadvantage than non-disadvantaged pupils in areas with low levels of disadvantage.¹⁵

Pupil attendance

1.11 Covid-19 has increased absenteeism with the attendance average still well below pre-pandemic levels since schools fully reopened. Many students missed a large amount of school time during the pandemic, even after schools had re-opened nationally. During the 2020/21 academic year, 18% of Year 11 students missed more than 20 days of school, with a further 24% missing between 11 and 20 days. In the first term of the 2021–22 academic year, about 50% of disadvantaged pupils in

Years 10 and 11 had missed at least 10% of in-person sessions, compared to 35% of non-disadvantaged pupils.⁴

1.12 The attendance gap between Free School Meals (FSM) pupils and their peers is stark. According to the DfE, over 28% of FSM primary pupils and 40% of FSM secondary pupils were persistently absent during the 2021-22 autumn term. Before the pandemic, typically around 10% of primary pupils and 15% of secondary pupils were registered as persistently absent from the classroom. The absence data has shown an increase in the attendance gap, with the absence rate rising for free school meal (FSM) pupils from 7.6% pre-pandemic, up to 9.7% in the 2021–22 autumn term.⁵

Mental health and wellbeing

1.13 In 2020, young people reported experiencing a higher increase in psychological distress, with pupils in deprived areas being the most affected.⁶ Over one in three young people (34%) said that their mental health has got much worse during the pandemic.⁷ According to NHS data, children with a probable mental disorder were more likely to live in a household that had fallen behind with payments such as bills and rent.⁸

2. The effectiveness of tutoring in narrowing the attainment gap

2.1 All of the above paints a bleak picture of the current situation in education for disadvantaged young people in particular, with much work still to be done to ensure that education recovery goals are met.

2.2 Tutoring is well known as a tangible and effective intervention to help pupils progress academically, realise their full potential and increase their life chances. There is a strong body of evidence that tutoring is an effective intervention, with an EEF research indicating that tuition can add as much as five months' progress to a young person's schooling.⁹ Indeed, this evidence base was one of the main reasons that the government introduced the National Tutoring Programme as a key part of its education recovery strategy, making the benefits of tutoring much more widely available beyond the domain of those that can afford it.

2.3 Action Tutoring's impact shows what is possible - compared to 53% percent of disadvantaged pupils passing GCSE maths nationally, 72% of disadvantaged pupils passed their maths GCSE after attending at least 10 tutoring sessions with us, despite being considered at risk by their school of not achieving this crucial benchmark. Pupils who also attended sessions in Year 10 were 27% more likely to pass their maths GCSE at the end of Year 11, as compared to others who did not receive our tutoring support.

3. The National Tutoring Programme (NTP)

3.1 Given the evidence base for tutoring, fundamentally, we believe that the NTP is a vital intervention with the potential to leave a strong legacy of expanding tutoring to more disadvantaged children to help close the attainment gap nationally. If implemented in a targeted way to those that need it most, the NTP can become the long-term intervention needed to reverse the damage done by Covid; if it becomes a permanent fixture in our education system.

Pupil Premium

3.2 In March 2021 we were very disappointed that the decision was made to remove the original target of 65% of pupils benefiting from the NTP being eligible for the Pupil Premium.¹⁰ Currently, there is no target for the NTP to deliver to those eligible for Pupil Premium, after the programme recorded 49% in its first year, missing the targeted percentage and with only 51% of pupils receiving tuition partners tutoring last year being eligible for the pupil premium and with no clear figure for those receiving schools led tutoring.¹¹

3.3 Action Tutoring shows what is possible to achieve. As a charity committed to improving the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils, 69% of all pupils Action Tutoring supported were in receipt of Pupil Premium, surpassing the national percentage for last year (51%) and original targets set by the NTP (65%) in its introduction year.

Focus on the disadvantaged

3.4 Even with the existence of the National Tutoring Programme, pupils in independent schools were more likely to be offered tutoring, 52 per cent compared to 41 per cent in state comprehensive

schools and 36% in state grammar schools. Pupils in private schools were less likely to feel that they needed this help, even if it was being offered by their schools.¹⁴

3.5 We are deeply concerned that if the NTP does not target in particular those facing disadvantage, it could even stand to widen the attainment gap further. The government had a laudable aim of delivering 6 million tutoring courses over the lifespan of the NTP, but if attention is not paid to whom those 6 million courses are delivered, the NTP could stand to achieve its ambition in terms of numbers but entirely miss the point in terms of impact and education recovery.

4. Challenges for schools

4.1 Most schools across the country are facing massive budget squeezes with the increase in teacher salaries (a welcome 5% uplift but with no additional funding for schools to cover this), rise in utility costs and decreasing retention of teachers impacting their finances and education delivery. We believe that these factors have all had an impact on the ability of schools to use the NTP funding to its full potential. This year, we have had to support many of our partner schools with additional fundraising and discounts on top of the NTP funding, in order for them to continue accessing our programme. It is not that they don't want it or can't see the budget, but many have been telling us that they are facing deficit budgets sometimes of up to £100k and are having to look at staff redundancies. We have noticed these issues being particularly acute in the north of England, which is where the majority of our discounts have been needed.

4.2 Whilst we understand the introduction of the schools led tutoring option for schools rather than schools only being able to use outsourced tuition providers and consider that for many schools this is a sensible choice, we are concerned that the structure of the funding for the two routes has opened the way for schools to use NTP funding for teaching assistants that whilst doing good work, may well not be doing anything additional to the work they would have done pre- covid. This is for two reasons. Firstly, the removal of a requirement for NTP tutoring to be delivered on a 1:3 basis to a 1:6 basis (March 2021) opened the way for tutoring to be delivered in much larger groups, not dissimilar to the work many Teaching Assistants would deliver. Yet, such large group sizes are not in line with EEF evidence for impactful tutoring.

4.3 Secondly, under the tuition partners route, schools can receive 60% subsidy but then need to find an additional 40%. With the current financial pressures they are under, this is considerable. In comparison, under school-led tutoring, they could put 60% of an existing salary for a teacher or a

teaching assistant against the NTP, effectively helping to cover gaps in their budgets. Given the huge financial pressures schools are under, it is not surprising this is happening, but it means the NTP is not necessarily delivering additional tutoring beyond small group work that likely would have happened pre covid anyway. This problem is set to worsen as the tutoring subsidy to schools drops from 60% to 25% next year. More schools will struggle and essential interventions such as tutoring may be relegated, which could lead to further widening of the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils.

4.4 Finally, we are concerned that this year, huge funding was spent on the design and running of the NTP website, yet Action Tutoring has had only one school signing up through the portal. We have heard very similar stories from our network of other tuition partners. Almost all of the partner schools Action Tutoring is working with were recruited through internal marketing strategies, at a cost to us, and through word of mouth amongst our network of schools. Schools have not yet fully brought into the NTP and further work is needed to win the hearts and minds of school leaders to the benefits of tutoring, particularly after an especially challenging year last year under the NTP delivery by Randstad.

5. Recommendations for improvement of the NTP

5.1 We strongly believe that the NTP can succeed and narrow the attainment gap, delivering value for money, if the following actions are taken.

5.2 Reinstatement of Pupil Premium targets and ideally reinstatement of group sizes to 1:3 or fewer rather than 1:6.

5.3 Commit to additional funding so that the subsidy drop is not so dramatic next year as well as commit funding to ensure the NTP remains an embedded intervention in the education system as a high-quality and evidence-driven programme to support disadvantaged pupils beyond 2024. Given schools start making budget decisions around April time and tuition partners also need time to recruit tutors, time is of the essence for a decision on this for next year.

5.4 Investment in evidence-building has been lacking and we believe that this is a missed opportunity. With so much tutoring happening up and down the country, this should be a prime opportunity to further investigate different models to understand what really drives impact, and to inform future tutoring practice in the UK for years to come.

6. Our Impact and Value

6.1 We believe that if the above recommendations are implemented, the NTP could be a transformative force for good for the lives of disadvantaged pupils. Action Tutoring shows what is possible as our tutoring model demonstrates strong and measurable impact for disadvantaged pupils at low cost to partner schools. Action Tutoring's analysis shows that primary pupils supported by the charity were more likely to achieve the expected standards than other disadvantaged pupils across the country — by 8 percentage points in maths and reading.¹ This was despite their being eligible for the pupil premium and considered by their school as not achieving national standards in their SATs. We saw a similar trend in our results with our maths GCSE cohort.¹

6.2 In the last academic year, compared to the 53% of disadvantaged pupils who passed GCSE maths nationally, our analysis shows that 72% of disadvantaged pupils tutored by the charity passed their GCSE maths after attending at least ten tutoring sessions - despite these pupils having been through two challenging years of pandemic disruption and being at risk of not achieving a passing grade. Additionally, pupils who also had Action Tutoring sessions in Year 10 were more likely to pass in that subject at GCSE, compared to other Action Tutoring pupils who did not — 11% more likely in English and 27% more likely in maths. More details are available in our latest impact report.¹

Value for money

6.3 It costs us £390 to deliver tuition to pupils for an academic year. Compared to the long term cost and consequences of young people not reaching national standards in the core subjects of English and maths, we believe that this represents excellent value for money. However, we don't believe that the NTP funding as a whole has always mirrored this kind of value that can be achieved. The funds spent on the development of a website that's not driving school interest is one example, alongside the failure to focus these funds on those pupils that need it most, namely those eligible for the pupil premium. In year 2 of the NTP, we also saw huge mismanagement of the programme under Randstad, which led to the programme developing a poor reputation and hours wasted by tuition partners managing contract disputes and poor support for implementation rather than being able to get on with the job of delivery of the ground. We are pleased that this year under Tribal, the programme is running more smoothly and commend the DfE for making this change.

7. Narrowing the attainment gap through tutoring

7.1 Action Tutoring's data and other related research have built sufficient evidence that clearly shows that tutoring has the potential to support academic catch-up, close the attainment gap and support the government in raising literacy and numeracy standards.

7.2 Finally, we would draw your attention to the joint research report with the Centre for Education and Youth, titled 'Levelling Up Tutoring - How can tutoring best contribute to closing England's attainment gap by 2030?'¹² It reiterates and builds on the recommendations that we have already outlined and makes many compelling recommendations on how to improve, embed and transform tutoring in the current system. These include the following, which we would wholly endorse:

7.3 For the NTP to be effective and achieve its intended goals, it requires a bipartisan commitment to long-term funding for schools, especially in remote and deprived areas, to cover the costs of tutoring programmes.

7.4 The DfE must restore and maintain Pupil Premium targets, else the programme risks losing focus on disadvantaged pupils.

7.5 The NTP should prioritise remote tutoring, in order to access more tutors and tap into a more diverse pool. Remote engagement can be particularly significant for cold spot areas, where tutoring is unavailable.

7.6 The NTP should maintain a simple approach to reporting and accountability that focuses on disadvantaged pupils and ensures Pupil Premium target accountability. The programme needs a coherent approach to the use and creation of evidence through a single research body providing real-time insights into the programme. Stakeholder networks should focus on sharing effective practice on delivery and capacity building to support disadvantaged pupils.

7.7 The NTP can influence the creation of flexible but consistent pathways between the teaching, teaching assistant and tutoring professions. Establishing these routes could help resolve recruitment and retention issues in teaching. It could also develop young tutors' soft skills, supporting growth in human capital and productivity at the national level.

7.8 The recommendations mentioned in the report must be implemented rapidly so we can take a step towards closing the attainment gap and creating a fairer, more inclusive education system in England. We hope that this evidence has proved insightful for you and we would be delighted to discuss it further with your committee should that be of interest.

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