



Impetus

National Tutoring Programme: The missing middle

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Executive summary

The “tutoring revolution” of the last two years has at consisted of many different components. From the original announcement of academic mentors and tuition partners; to the related strands the 16 to 19 tuition fund and the Nuffield Early Language Intervention; to the more recent schools-led tutoring route, billions of pounds of tutoring related funding has emerged from the debate around post-covid catch-up.

The National Tutoring Programme (NTP) should be seen as more than an umbrella brand for some (or all) of these parts. The NTP is an offer to schools: a package of support schools can access and tailor to their needs – and the needs of their pupils.

Indeed, the announced ambition of up to 6 million tutoring courses is potentially transformative. It's enough tutoring for every young person in receipt of the pupil premium to receive tutoring in English and maths, enabling them to make several months additional progress. By focussing on pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, tutoring can help close the attainment gap, a historic challenge exacerbated by pandemic-era remote learning.

This was the original vision behind the first year of delivery, when EEF and Teach First delivered on behalf of the Department for Education with the help of Nesta, the Sutton Trust and Impetus. And it was the original vision behind the contract for the second year, ultimately awarded to Randstad.

But with changes at Ministerial level, and the difficulties in delivery last year, this overarching vision risks being lost. The decision by the department to invite tenders for three narrow lots, while taking on more responsibility itself, is a bold one. It is not without risk - the department is now responsible for NTP, and will need to manage its three contracts carefully to avoid any issues falling through the cracks.

The risk is a gap at the heart of the NTP, with some functions vital to the success of the programme being overlooked or forgotten and the department's stated ambition of reaching young people from disadvantaged backgrounds risks being missed. In a decentralised NTP where schools have lots of autonomy and individual contractors have narrow responsibilities, stated priorities like this require an explicit mechanism for delivery.

Whether the department ultimately takes on this leadership role itself, or commissions some else to do so, or whether the contractors and the department collectively cover the missing middle, a plan to address the gaps is vital.

There are three key areas where gaps need addressing to ensure NTP achieves its potential and ultimately delivers on its mission ensuring that quality tutoring is available to all those schools and pupils who need it.

Firstly, there's work to be done to bring evidence and insight together across the programme to inform and underpin this agenda. This means both rapid management information and slower but authoritative evaluation. In the former category, this includes clear data on issues such as reach of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and in different parts of the country. But it also means understanding attendance and outcomes for young people, so inform improvements in practice and deliver. In the latter category, evaluation must show which elements of NTP are delivering outcomes, so these can be spread.

Secondly, there's work to be done to drive quality and improvement across the programme. This is underpinned by evidence and insight. For example, one part of reaching young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is to identify gaps in provision – such as geographical cold spots – and work with local stakeholders, contractors and tuition partners to address them. There's also the question of legacy: if NTP is to be a time limited intervention with subsidies withdrawn over time and the pupil premium picking up the strain of funding tutoring, how does NTP bridge to that new reality?

Finally, there's work to be done on advocating for tutoring. After the difficulties schools have faced under the Randstad contract, the NTP needs to win hearts and minds in the sector to ensure buy-in to NTP and a focus on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Both schools and key sector stakeholders such as NAHT need to be able to provide feedback on NTP to inform the programme.

This is quite a long to do list for “the NTP” – and very little of it was in any of the tendered lots. Ultimately **the department must address all these issues either itself, with the contractors, or with other partners.** This reports sets out how this can be achieved in more detail.

The NTP is at a fork in the road. There is a risk the department gives schools the money but is then unable to tackle the issues they have in spending it well. This is particularly the case if schools see tutoring as an optional extra rather than a central part of their work at a time when budgets are stretched by inflation. But with good planning, it's also possible to deliver an NTP that drives quality and improvement in the system and leads to better outcomes for young people. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular, need the NTP to live up to this ambition.

Recommendations

The Department for Education must ensure that between itself and its contractors, and any other partners it brings into the fold, the following vital NTP functions are delivered:

- Legacy planning so that as NTP subsidies are withdrawn over time, the programme acts as a bridge to a system funded by pupil premium
- Clear and consistent data is made available on issues such as reach of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and in different parts of the country
- Identification and addressing gaps in provision – such as geographical cold spots – and weaker areas in delivery
- Feedback and improvement mechanisms so that both schools and key sector stakeholders such as NAHT can influence programme development
- Winning hearts and minds in the sector to ensure buy-in to NTP and that schools focus on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds
- Impact evaluation to identify best practice from the range of models and lay the foundations for tutoring's long-term role in the education system

1 Introduction

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds – those eligible for pupil premium funding – are only about half as likely to get crucial GCSE passes in English and maths. This attainment gap had been closing very slowly, and just prior to the pandemic progress had stalled for the first time in a decade.¹ Then the pandemic hit, with all the evidence suggesting this will widen the attainment gap.²

Impetus exists to transform the lives of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, by ensuring they get the support they need to succeed. It's why we helped set up the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in 2011, to grow the evidence base on what high quality support looks like. It's why we've been funding Action Tutoring since 2014, a high impact tutoring charity. And it's why we worked with EEF to make the case for, and then roll out, the National Tutoring Programme (NTP) in 2020.

Tutoring is one of the best-evidenced interventions for supporting young people to make accelerated progress, with the EEF toolkit showing small group tuition can lead to up to 4 months of additional progress.³ Their evaluation of The Tutor Trust in the north of England found similar results.ⁱ Similarly, EEF evaluation shows a positive impact from a graduate coaching model.⁴

But quality tutoring isn't readily available to every school that needs it. Previous attempts to roll out tutoring more widely as part of the *Making Good Progress* pilot in the late 2000s suffered from the difficulty in finding quality tutors and concerns about the quality of external tutors.⁵

The government's "tutoring revolution" and the NTP is a substantial effort to improve attainment through small group tutoring in various forms. From the original announcement of academic mentors (based on the proven graduate coaching model) and tuition partners (based on the proven Tutor Trust model); to the related strands the 16 to 19 tuition fund and the Nuffield Early Language Intervention; to the more recent schools-led tutoring route, lots of tutoring related funding has emerged from the debate around post-covid catch-up.

Crucially, NTP's central mission is to ensure that quality tutoring is available to all those schools and pupils who need it. In that sense, the NTP, is more than an umbrella brand for some (or all) of its parts. The NTP is an offer to schools: a package of support schools can access and tailor to their needs – and the needs of their pupils, to boost academic attainment for those who need it most.

As with any large scheme, delivering the NTP in practice has not been without challenges. With the move to three contractors and the DfE working in partnership to deliver the NTP from 2022-23, this overarching mission risks being lost. And the DfE is even more responsible for making for that nothing slips through the cracks.

⁵ ⁱ Impetus started funding The Tutor Trust as a result, to help them reach more young people

The risk is a gap at the heart of the NTP, with no-one in the driving seat – the missing middle. Whether the department ultimately takes on this role itself, or commissions some else to do so, or whether the contractors and the department collectively provide joint leadership, leadership of “the NTP” overall is a must.

Without this leadership, the department’s stated ambition of reaching young people from disadvantaged backgrounds risks being missed. In a decentralised NTP where schools have lots of autonomy and individual contractors have narrow responsibilities, stated priorities like this require an explicit mechanism for delivery.

The elements of the missing middle fall into three broad areas, which are outlined in this report.

1. Evidence and insight
2. Quality and improvement
3. Advocacy and engagement

2 Evidence and Insight

“Everything works somewhere, and nothing works everywhere, which is why in education, the right question is: under what conditions does this work?”. Dylan William’s observation is the starting point for any sensible discussion about evidence in education.

In the NTP context, answering this will be an iterative process initially. In part, this reflects the fact the programme is still being rolled out. Every year, hopefully, new tuition partners will come into NTP. It also reflects the very nature of NTP. NTP’s central mission by making sure that quality tutoring is available to all those schools and pupils who need it. Where something isn’t working, NTP is designed to try to fix it. Over time, the conditions under which NTP works should increase.

As it stands, nobody is responsible for that iterative process. NTP contractors have responsibilities in their specific contractual domains. The DfE has a role in trying to knit everything together. But it is far from clear how far they can take this. Insight about things not working as well as they could risks being perceived as failure on DfE’s part. Based on past experience, it would be optimistic to expect them to relish this information being widely available, even though that transparency is necessary for programme improvement.

As a starting point, we need publicly available data on the take-up of NTP. Detailed information about which local authority areas, which subjects and which year groups are benefitting from the various elements of the NTP offer is essential. Without this information, it is almost impossible to do anything except hope for the best. The contractors themselves will doubtless be collecting much of this sort of management information.

But this headline data will only tell half the story and needs to be supported by work gathering further data, including qualitative data from schools on their experiences of NTP. Understanding perceptions and weaknesses of the programme is essential, even if potentially uncomfortable. For example, tutoring works much better if pupils attend sessions, so attendance data is an important part of the picture. Richer data underpins work to drive improvement and quality at a programme level.

And this clearly is harder for the contractors themselves to lead on, given the need to collect honest feedback on what isn’t working so well. One of the questions that needs to be explored is which of the different models works best in different circumstances. The contractors have an obvious commercial interest in their own areas of work.

There is also a need to understand what *is* working well in different places and to spread it around the system. Many places will face similar challenges and there is no need for schools to keep reinventing the wheel, especially considering high teacher workloads. Some of this evidence can be shared easily through case studies, though this is not a substitute for investing time in deeper understanding as well.

The key is turning all these different sources of data and insight into meaningful programme change. Whether that involves schools, contractors or DfE doing something different, evidence gathering is more than an academic exercise. There is no point in doing this if it doesn't result in change.

None of this is a replacement for formal impact evaluation, which should be commissioned from an independent organisation. Impact evaluation, to demonstrate the link between NTP and pupil outcomes, is an important part of the big picture. Ultimately, if elements of NTP tutoring aren't improving outcomes they should be stopped. The elements that are working should be prioritised and expanded.

These are two separate elements of evidence and insight: rapid management information to inform immediate work; robust impact evaluation that takes longer but stands the test of time. The central mission of ensuring that quality tutoring is available to all those schools and pupils who need it clearly cannot be achieved if we don't know where it isn't available and what is working. Evidence and insight, especially the rapid elements, drive quality and improvement.

3 Quality and Improvement

The NTP, and tutoring, needs to get better. This statement is surely true, regardless of how high (or low) your opinion of these things is. It's the more direct version of the concept of "continuous improvement". But what does continuous improvement look like in the new model of NTP?

This is particularly important in the context of the longer-term future and NTP's legacy. NTP is envisaged as a time limited intervention with subsidies withdrawn over time and the pupil premium eventually picking up the strain of funding tutoring. The NTP needs to bridge to that reality.

Legacy is probably the key metric of success for NTP. Because the central mission of "ensuring that quality tutoring is available to all those schools and pupils who need it" was not a time limited concept. Part of the rationale for creating NTP was to spread quality tutoring to the many places where it was previously unavailable, so that it would be available going forwards.

Some elements sit best with the DfE's contractors. Impetus has outlined in our earlier report on tuition partners how Tribal, the new contractor, could be tasked with a capacity building programme to support quality improvement in the tuition partners' sector.⁶ Cognition Education will doubtless refine and improve their criteria for recruiting academic mentors over time. In addition, clearly, the DfE has a role to ensure that its contractors improve their processes over time – contract management.

But focussing on improvement only at the level of the contractors is inherently disbursed and potentially disjointed – there is still a need to think about improving NTP as an offer at the programme level. This includes not just helping schools make good decisions between the various elements of the offer, but improving the offers themselves to better meet the needs of schools.

Partly, this is about incentivising and incubating new approaches. The current NTP is built from proven models, and the evidence base should always be the foundation of everything the NTP does. But the evidence base evolves, the needs of schools and pupils evolves, and NTP must evolve too. Somewhere in the tutoring ecosystem someone needs to be responsible for driving this forward.

In addition to this, we can sidestep the structural specifics of NTP to think about creating a tutoring profession. Regardless of how tutors are recruited or deployed, they are all tutors. If we want tutoring to become part of the education landscape, we need tutors to become part of the education landscape.

There are lots of potentially exciting options here as tutoring beds into the system. Can tutoring become a route into teaching for some people, or the teaching equivalent of an internship? Do we want trainee teachers to do some tutoring as part of their training? What CPD should tutors get, and do we want something akin to an experienced tutor role in schools? How do we leverage the network of former tutors as ambassadors and advocates?

And no plan for quality and improvement can succeed without a plan for improving things on the school side. Schools are the buyers of tutoring and the decision makers for almost everything that counts. There is a need to spread what works for schools around the system, for example through peer networks; just as there is a need to tackle local issues and develop bespoke solutions. And of course, schools' feedback and reflections is an essential part of the insight on which all this work is built.

So there is a range of potential quality and improvement work, both to make the NTP work better now, and set tutoring up for long-term success as a central part of the system. In addition to tackling the problems of today, this work will inevitably range across the many opportunities and challenges that unfold as tutoring takes root in the system and becomes a full part of it.

Quality is the single biggest risk to the longevity of tutoring in this country. Tutoring is promising schools accelerated progress for their pupils, because the evidence shows this is possible. But tutoring has never been tried at this scale before. If quality falls short, and schools feel tutoring has been mis-sold, this will set back the case for tutoring for a generation.

4 Advocacy and Engagement

For the NTP to work, schools have to choose tutoring. This isn't a quirk of the structure of the NTP, it's a deeper point. Even free quality tutoring available won't actually make much of a difference if schools treat it as just another thing on a very long to do list. Schools have to invest time in things like selecting pupils and making sure the tutoring actually meets their needs. Without that investment, the availability of quality tutoring that is NTP's mission does not translate into impact on young people's outcomes.

At the moment, no-one is responsible for making the case for tutoring to schools. There are contractors responsible for running different parts of the scheme. The DfE is going to provide support for schools to navigate the system. But who is going to be on the front foot, encouraging schools to take the time to engage with NTP, trying to win hearts and minds in the sector? Until an impact evaluation shows definitively what is working, this is essential to ensuring NTP is actually used.

What's needed is a strong and focussed champion for tutoring, who can ensure the powerful message that gets to schools is one of substance: the benefits for pupils. Last year, Regional Schools Commissioners did some of this work, contacting MATs and councils about NTP take up.⁷ But though the DfE has resources it can direct towards this work, it is inevitably transactional.

The DfE inevitably fills a different role in terms of its communication about NTP. It focusses on the subsidy, and there is always the looming concern in the sector – whether justified or not – that in the background looms harder edged accountability from Ofsted or league tables. Schools need to be treated as partners, and not be left feeling like they are being told what to do. This will enable them to become informed purchasers of quality tutoring.

Powerful rather than transactional messaging is particularly important after a difficult year where tutoring has become associated with the issues of Randstad's approach to the NTP. There are of course huge differences between tutoring (a proven approach to raising attainment), and Randstad's NTP (a disproven approach to running a national programme). But there is a risk the latter drags the former down if schools conclude that tutoring didn't work.

There is also a need to champion the bigger picture – for example, the need to focus on pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Under NTP schools now have autonomy to select which pupils, and how many, are put forward for tutoring. A consequence of this is that any national target or ambition to reach pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds no longer has a mechanism for delivery. Achieving this will require engagement and partnership on the ground, rather than central diktat – carrot not stick.

This also applies to the big picture desire to address cold spots in provision, be they geographical, or subject, or year group. NTP as currently structured makes it nobody's responsibility to investigate the issues behind these gaps in provision and work with partners to address them. Once again, the DfE could do this, but sending in the man from the ministry may not be perceived as the constructive move that is needed to make progress.

Doing this work well will also require a range of stakeholder engagements with those interested in the work of the NTP. There needs to be space to collaborate, to provide feedback and to partner with the NTP. Even the framing of these needs highlights the problem. Who or what is "the NTP" in this new format?

There is a clear role for an externally focussed face for the NTP that works alongside the delivery by the contractors, and the work of the DfE, to win hearts and minds of the sector and help embed the overall tutoring offer. This role helps achieve NTP's central mission of ensuring that quality tutoring is available to all those schools and pupils who need it, but also helps translate that availability into take-up and, ultimately, outcomes for young people.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

This report has outlined a series of things that needs to happen for NTP to achieve its central mission by making sure that quality tutoring is available to all those schools and pupils who need it:

- Legacy planning so that as NTP subsidies are withdrawn over time, the programme acts as a bridge to a system funded by pupil premium
- Clear and consistent data is made available on issues such as reach of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and in different parts of the country
- Identification and addressing gaps in provision – such as geographical cold spots – and weaker areas in delivery
- Feedback and improvement mechanisms so that both schools and key sector stakeholders such as NAHT can influence programme development
- Winning hearts and minds in the sector to ensure buy-in to NTP and that schools focus on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds
- Impact evaluation to identify best practice from the range of models and lay the foundations for tutoring's long-term role in the education system

This is not a menu of ideas, this is a package of reforms that is not as impactful if only delivered in part. These recommendations are interlocked and reinforce one another. Evidence and insight underpins quality and improvement. Quality and improvements are key messages that need to be shared. Engagement with stakeholders helps identify insight and informs quality and improvement strategy. These are virtuous cycles.

Unfortunately, none of this vital work was in any of the tendered lots, and it is unclear how much of it DfE intended to pick up – or indeed is well placed to pick up.

There may not be a single right way of delivering all of this work. Some of it sits naturally with the NTP contractors, who will inevitably need be collecting management information on programme uptake and delivery. Some of it can be done well by the DfE, like the long-term policy planning for NTP's legacy.

But there is also a clear need for someone else in the system to take on a vital role as a champion of tutoring. Someone needs to be unashamedly pro tutoring not because they have a need to be, but because they know it's right for young people. Someone who can bring people together to make NTP work without having their own vested interests, political, commercial or otherwise. Someone who is independent of the NTP, but not an outsider to the sector.

There are lots of options for this independent tutoring champion.

- This could be something an existing organisation takes on, philanthropically funded. This maximises independence from government but fundraising for it creates additional work and some elements of the behind-the-scenes work aren't necessarily philanthropy friendly – if you're a funder interested in tutoring, you probably want to fund the actual tutoring.
- DfE could commission someone to do the work. This is how the rest of the NTP delivery works and has the advantage of ensuring political accountability and the disadvantage in terms of compromising independence.
- The DfE could set up some sort of arms-length entity to do it. The Office of the Children's Commissioner has established itself as a model for independent but publicly funded championing, but there are set up costs, financial and otherwise.

There is no right answer, only trade-offs. Sustainability of funding, conflicts of interest, ability to do the work, independence (and perception of independence) will vary by option. But DfE needs to map out how it wants this work to be delivered if it wants NTP to succeed.

The NTP is at a fork in the road. The mission is clear: to ensure that quality tutoring is available to all those schools and pupils who need it. There is a risk the department gives schools the money for tutoring but is then unable to tackle the issues they have in spending it well. But with good planning, it's also possible to deliver an NTP that drives quality and improvement in the system and leads to better outcomes for young people. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular, need the NTP to live up to this ambition.

Recommendations

The Department for Education must ensure that between itself and its contractors, and any other partners it brings into the fold, the following vital NTP functions are delivered:

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About Impetus

Impetus transforms the lives of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds by ensuring they get the right support to succeed in school, in work and in life.

We do this by finding, funding and building the most promising charities working with these young people and by influencing policy and resources.

We support a number of charities helping to give disadvantaged young people a chance to succeed in school, in work and in life.

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