

Tutoring Guarantee

Policy Brief

August 2026

Tutoring is the strongest and best-evidenced educational tool we have for closing the attainment gap and making sure that students who fall behind their peers get back on track. But too many of the young people who need tutoring the most are missing out – schools and colleges are having to cut back on tutoring while affluent families are investing in private tutors like never before.

Domestic and international evidence on the use of tutoring to combat Covid-era learning loss means we know more than ever about the conditions that enable tutoring to have impact at scale – and the pitfalls for policymakers to avoid. New technology, especially AI, has the potential to make tutoring both more powerful and more efficient. There is an urgent and compelling case for government to seize the opportunity of this moment, and establish a **Tutoring Guarantee** – a national state-funded tutoring offer that builds on what we know works, learns the implementation lessons of the pandemic era and embraces the promise of the future.

In this policy brief, we put forward nine key design principles for an effective Tutoring Guarantee:

- 01** Target tutoring to **close the attainment gap**
- 02** Support tutoring from **age 5 to age 19**
- 03** Focus on **English and Maths**
- 04** Fund at least **15 hours** of tutoring per student
- 05** Tutoring should be delivered in **groups of no more than four**
- 06** **Give schools and colleges the support they need to commission high-quality tutoring,**
delivered in-house or by external tutors
- 07** Make it a **fully-funded, multi-year offer**
- 08** Require **accountability without excessive bureaucracy**
- 09** Harness the **potential of AI** for the most disadvantaged students

This brief was developed by an emerging coalition of organisations that believe in the potential of tutoring to give all young people – regardless of their background or where they live – a fair opportunity to learn and succeed. We hope that it will support the growing momentum behind this important policy effort.

Why does England need a Tutoring Guarantee?

Small-group tutoring has consistently been shown to be one of the most effective educational interventions, with an average impact of four months' additional progress over the course of a year.¹ It is a powerful tool for closing the persistent attainment gap that exists in English education – one that can be deployed much more quickly and more precisely than any other policy lever for addressing educational inequality. Tutoring is also great value for money, offering a return of £6.58 for every £1 of public money spent.²

Tutoring is popular with families, both in England and Wales – where the proportion of students accessing private tutoring has grown from a fifth to a third in less than 20 years³ – and in many of the highest-performing education systems, especially in east Asia.⁴ However, since disadvantaged students are much less likely to benefit, the rise of private tutoring is actually widening the attainment gap.

Despite the strength of evidence, state schools and colleges underinvest in tutoring – while 77% of parents want to see an increase in tutoring provision,⁵ just 15% of school leaders indicated they planned to offer tutoring in the absence of dedicated external funding⁶ – and by March 2025, 58% reported that their school was providing less tutoring than in the previous school year.⁷ This underinvestment is symptomatic of the financial pressures facing schools, the reduced buying power of the Pupil Premium,⁸ and the understandable tendency of school and college leaders to prioritise covering core costs over a supplementary intervention. Charitably-funded programmes do their best, but their reach is limited by schools' and colleges' inability to match-fund.

The response to the Covid pandemic showed how ambitious government-led efforts can scale tutoring to millions more students. But they also showed how the wrong policy design can undermine efficacy and impact. Evaluations of England's National Tutoring Programme⁹ and federally-funded tutoring in the United States¹⁰ document how weak implementation failed to produce the levels of academic impact seen in pre-Covid studies.

But tutoring is too powerful a tool for policymakers to leave it on the shelf, and new technology (especially AI) has the potential to make it both more powerful and more efficient. Many education systems – especially in the US¹¹ – are now applying the lessons of the pandemic era to make tutoring a permanent feature. Looking ahead, there is an urgent and compelling case for government to establish a Tutoring Guarantee – a national state-funded tutoring offer that builds on what we know works and embraces the promise of the future.

¹ Education Endowment Foundation. (n.d.). *Small group tuition. Teaching and Learning Toolkit*.

² Savours, B. and Rodriguez, M. (2024). *The Economic Impact of the National Tutoring Programme: Methodology and results*. Public First.

³ Cullinane, C. & Montacute, R. (2023). *Tutoring – the new landscape*. The Sutton Trust.

⁴ Bray, M. (2022). *Shadow Education in Asia and the Pacific: Features and Implications of Private Supplementary Tutoring*.

⁵ Burtonshaw, S. and Simons, J. (2023). *The Future of Tutoring*. Public First.

⁶ Lynch, S. et al. (2024). *National Tutoring Programme – Evaluation and Reflections*. NFER.

⁷ The Sutton Trust. (2025). *School funding and pupil premium 2025*.

⁸ Drayton, E. et al. (2023). *Annual report on education spending in England: 2023*. Institute for Fiscal Studies.

⁹ Department for Education (2023). *Independent evaluation of the National Tutoring Programme Year 2: Impact Evaluation*.

¹⁰ Bhatt, M. P. et al (2025). *Personalised Learning Initiative Interim Report: Findings from 2023-24*. The University of Chicago Education Lab.

¹¹ Jacobson, L. (2026). *COVID Relief Funds are Gone, But More States Commit to High-Impact Tutoring*. The 74.

Nine design principles for a Tutoring Guarantee

1. Target tutoring to close the attainment gap

Tutoring can be helpful for any student who is falling behind their peers, and schools and colleges are best placed to determine which students would benefit most from tutoring and when. However, while the English education system has been successful in raising overall student attainment over the past two decades, there is a stubborn attainment gap for students facing disadvantage, and this gap has widened since Covid.¹² Overwhelmingly, the students falling behind their peers are those from low-income households – they also tend to be white¹³ and are more likely to have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).¹⁴

We know that tutoring is a particularly effective tool for tackling the attainment gap. A systematic review of interventions designed to improve educational outcomes of students from low socio-economic backgrounds identified tutoring, including one-to-one and small-group tuition, as the most effective approach.¹⁵ One study by the EEF concluded that tutoring ‘may be particularly beneficial for disadvantaged pupils,’ with students eligible for free schools meals making three months additional progress compared to a control group.¹⁶ Conversely, inequalities in access to tutoring exacerbate the attainment gap, with 32% of students in the top income quartile receiving private tutoring compared to less than 13% of those in the bottom quartile.¹⁷

Although the NTP demonstrated how a national programme can expand access to tutoring, its impact was undermined by unclear targeting and success criteria. The scheme was initially presented as being for ‘the most disadvantaged young people’ in order to ‘prevent the gap between them and their more affluent peers from widening,’¹⁸ but there was no explicit target for what proportion of students receiving tutoring should be disadvantaged, and a target introduced in the second year of the scheme was subsequently dropped. Even though the most deprived areas of England – with the lowest rates of private tutoring – experienced the highest rates of school-based tutoring under the NTP,¹⁹ fewer than half (46%) of the pupils who received tutoring in the first year of the scheme were eligible for Pupil Premium²⁰ and the NTP was generally criticised for not reaching a high enough proportion of disadvantaged students.

Future state support for tutoring should be targeted to achieve a clear policy objective: helping to close the attainment gap. A more loosely framed scheme, aimed at helping all pupils with low attainment catch up, may have some intuitive appeal,²¹ but it is a much weaker basis for targeting a national offer. It would be

¹² Hunt, E. et al. (2025). *Breaking down the gap: The role of school absence and pupil characteristics*. Education Policy Institute.

¹³ Plaister, N. & Thomson, D. (2025). *The educational outcomes of disadvantaged White pupils*. FFT Education Datalab.

¹⁴ O'Regan, C. & Latham, K. (2025). *Double Disadvantage? Socio-economic inequalities in the SEND system*. The Sutton Trust.

¹⁵ Dietrichson, J. et al. (2017). *Academic Interventions for Elementary and Middle School Students with Low Socioeconomic Status: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*. *Review of Educational Research*. 87(2), 243-282.

¹⁶ Education Endowment Foundation (2018). *Tutor Trust: Affordable Primary Tuition*.

¹⁷ Cullinane, C. & Montacute, R. (2023). *Tutoring – the new landscape*. The Sutton Trust.

¹⁸ Department for Education et al (2020). *Billion pound Covid catch-up plan to tackle impact of lost teaching time*.

¹⁹ Cullinane, C. & Montacute, R. (2023). *Tutoring – the new landscape*. The Sutton Trust.

²⁰ Lord, P., Poet, H. & Styles, B. (2022). *Evaluation of Year 1 of the Tuition Partners Programme*. NFER.

²¹ Simons, J., Burtonshaw, S. & Yates, W. (2025). *Past lessons, future vision – evolving state-funded tutoring for the future*. Public First.

vulnerable to the lack of focus that beset the NTP and could even produce a perverse outcome whereby high-performing schools serving disadvantaged communities received less support than low-performing schools with more affluent catchments. Helping individual students to achieve their potential is the core business of colleges and schools, whereas the attainment gap – the stark correlation between disadvantage and low attainment – is a national challenge, requiring a system-level policy response.

In practice, the rules of a Tutoring Guarantee would need to be framed flexibly enough to allow schools and colleges to determine how and when to deploy tutoring as part of their wider suite of interventions. Ofsted considered this challenge of within-school targeting in its review of tutoring and concluded that: ‘The stronger schools providing tutoring were using a range of information to prioritise pupils for tuition. This typically focused on pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, these schools used wider assessments, supplemented by teachers’ knowledge, to identify the pupils who could benefit most from tuition. This was more effective when the assessments focused on the component knowledge of the curriculum to identify who had fallen furthest behind or had developed misconceptions.’²²

However, success for a Tutoring Guarantee should be defined in terms of a measurable long-term impact on the attainment gap. Funding allocations to schools and colleges should reflect this (see Design Principle 7). At any given point, the Government should expect at least 65% of students receiving tutoring through the scheme to be from disadvantaged backgrounds and put itself in a position to measure whether this is happening (see Design Principle 8). The Government’s current plans to develop a new model for targeting disadvantage funding²³ – which could give greater weight to whether a student or their locality has experienced persistent disadvantage – may provide a useful template for ensuring that funding for a Tutoring Guarantee can be effectively targeted to have the biggest impact in closing the attainment gap.

2. Support tutoring from age 5 to age 19

There are good reasons for supporting schools and colleges to provide tutoring to all age groups, and no clear rationale for limiting it to a specific age or phase of education. Studies show large, positive effects from school-based tutoring from preschool through the end of secondary education.²⁴

An attainment gap equivalent to more than four months of learning is already present by age 5 and this gap continues to widen during primary school.²⁵ The last Labour government targeted small-group and one-to-one tutoring through its Every Child a Reader programme, which had strong evidence of impact for improving children’s reading in Key Stage 1.²⁶

²² Ofsted (2023). *Independent review of tutoring in schools: phase 1 findings*.

²³ Department for Education. (2026). *Every child achieving and thriving (CP 1508-II)*.

²⁴ Nickow, A. et al. (2020). *The impressive effects of tutoring on preK-12 learning: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the experimental evidence*. National Bureau of Economic Research. Working Paper 27476.

²⁵ Education Policy Institute. (2025). *Annual Report: Disadvantage*.

²⁶ Department for Education (2010). *Evaluation of Every Child a Reader*.

The gap continues to widen in secondary school. An EEF review of the evidence on maths highlights the amount of lesson time in Key Stage 3 spent revisiting content from earlier years due to concerns that students have not mastered key concepts.²⁷ Tutoring with this age group offers the potential to put students on a secure footing before they start studying for GCSEs.

Only half of disadvantaged students achieve a standard pass in both GCSE English and maths by age 16, compared to more than three quarters of their peers.²⁸ Tutoring in colleges is vital to ensure students can successfully resit their GCSEs and access a fuller range of post-16 education, training and career options. An evaluation of Get Further's GCSE Resit Tuition Programme found that students who participated achieved higher pass rates in both English and maths compared to the national average; disadvantaged students performed in line with their more advantaged peers in English and outperformed them in maths.²⁹

Guidance already exists³⁰ to help schools and colleges make evidence-based decisions about the most effective moments at which to deploy tutoring, and the considerations that apply to different age groups (for example, literacy tutors working with the youngest age groups will require specialist training in phonics tuition). But against the background, a Tutoring Guarantee should give schools and colleges flexibility to decide.

3. Focus on English and maths

The priority for a Tutoring Guarantee should be English and maths. When students fall behind in English or maths they struggle to access the rest of the curriculum, further widening the attainment gap. The literature shows 'little rigorous evidence' for the impact of tutoring programs focused on other subjects.³¹

Qualitative research conducted by Public First in 2025 found that both teachers and parents identified English and maths as the most important place to focus limited government funds – while parents like the idea of tutoring for catch-up or enrichment in a wider range of subjects, they recognise that it is a nice-to-have.³² This echoes evidence from evaluations of the NTP, where 'Senior leaders and teachers were in agreement that focusing on English and maths was key for supporting pupils' learning recovery. As one senior leader said: "These are the subjects that are most important. You're unable to access the curriculum unless you've a good understanding in these areas".³³ Passing GCSE English and maths (or equivalent) is also a prerequisite for many jobs, and for starting an apprenticeship.³⁴

Although the NTP permitted tutoring in a range of subjects, in practice, 95% of senior leaders surveyed by evaluators reported that they were prioritising English and 88% were prioritising maths, compared to science

²⁷ Hodgen, J., Foster, C., Marks, R. & Brown, M. (2018). *Improving Mathematics in Key Stages Two and Three: Evidence Review*.

²⁸ Department for Education. (2025). *Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25, 2023/24 (figure 10)*.

²⁹ ImpactED Evaluation (2024). *Get Further's GCSE Resit Tuition Programme*.

³⁰ For example: Education Endowment Foundation. (2022). *Making a difference with effective tutoring*.

³¹ Robinson, C. D. & Loeb, S. (2021). *High-Impact Tutoring: State of the Research and Priorities for Future Learning*. EdWorking Paper, 21-384. Annenberg Institute, Brown University.

³² Simons, J., Burtonshaw, S. & Yates, W. (2025). *Past lessons, future vision – evolving state-funded tutoring for the future*. Public First.

³³ Department for Education (2023). *Independent evaluation of the National Tutoring Programme Year 2: Impact Evaluation*.

³⁴ Department for Education. (2026). *English and maths requirements in apprenticeships guidance*.

(60%), humanities (35%) and modern foreign languages (32%).³⁵ Likewise, Ofsted's review of tutoring concluded that 'Typically, schools were prioritising tutoring on English and maths, although secondary schools often had more capacity for tutoring to cover a wider range of national curriculum subjects.'³⁶

If a future Tutoring Guarantee was particularly generously funded, it may make sense to allow schools and colleges a greater degree of subject choice, but in the absence of such generous funding, policymakers should be careful not to spread the impact of the scheme too thinly.

4. Fund at least 15 hours of tutoring per student

The best evidence of impact is for what the literature calls 'high-dosage' tutoring.³⁷ The EEF Toolkit states that 'Short, regular sessions (about 30 minutes, three to five times a week) over a set period of time (up to ten weeks) appear to result in optimum impact,'³⁸ indicating that the optimal dosage is between 15 and 25 hours. For example, students receiving less than 20 hours tutoring have been found to score one grade-point higher than a control group, with students receiving more than 20 hours scoring 1.8 grade-points higher;³⁹ 20 week programmes such as Every Child a Reader and Every Child a Writer both saw larger performance gains than the 10-hour Making Good Progress programme.⁴⁰ More recently, evidence from pandemic recovery efforts in the United States highlight case studies such as the Tennessee Accelerating Literacy and Learning Corps, which provided small-group sessions of 30-45 minutes long, with the same tutor, at least twice a week for at least a full semester (equivalent to a dosage of 17-27 hours).⁴¹

The NTP set an expectation that students should receive at least 15 hours of tutoring, the bottom end of the EEF's optimal range. In practice, many students received less than 15 hours, an issue exacerbated by high levels of Covid-related absence.⁴² Likewise a large-scale study, looking at the impact of the US Government's post-pandemic funding for high-dosage tutoring, observed that 'More tutoring minutes correlate with greater learning gains. But, minutes of tutoring provided [via the post-pandemic funding were] much lower than past tutoring studies (corresponding to smaller gains in student learning).'⁴³

Ofsted have reported implementation challenges where school-level approaches to tutoring dosage do not align with evidence-based guidance. In some cases, schools increased the total number of students in

³⁵ Department for Education (2023). *Independent evaluation of the National Tutoring Programme Year 2: Impact Evaluation*.

³⁶ Ofsted (2023). *Independent review of tutoring in schools: phase 1 findings*.

³⁷ Robinson, C. D. & Loeb, S. (2021). *High-Impact Tutoring: State of the Research and Priorities for Future Learning*. EdWorking Paper, 21-384. Annenberg Institute, Brown University.

³⁸ Education Endowment Foundation. (n.d.). *One to one tuition. Teaching and Learning Toolkit*.

³⁹ Smyth E. (2008). *The More, the Better? 'Intensity of Involvement in Private Tuition and Examination Performance'*. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, volume 14, (issue 5), pages 465–76.

⁴⁰ Tanner E. et al. (2009). *'Every Child a Reader (ECaR). Research Report DFERR114'*.

⁴¹ The Education Trust (2022). *Promising Practices: Smart State Strategies for Building Intensive Tutoring Systems*.

⁴² Lynch, S., Lucas, M., Davies, E., Sahasranaman, A., Schwendel, G., & NFER. (2022). *Independent Evaluation of the National Tutoring Programme Year 2: Implementation and Process Evaluation. In Research Report*.

⁴³ Bhatt, M. P. et al (2025). *Personalised Learning Initiative Interim Report: Findings from 2023-24*. The University of Chicago Education Lab.

receipt of tutoring by giving students as few as five sessions, in other cases Ofsted observed students being 'kept in sessions well beyond 15 hours, often with little idea of whether attending was helping them.'⁴⁴

Although policymakers face an unavoidable trade-off, between more tutoring for a smaller number of students and less tutoring for a larger number, they should resist the temptation to spread the resources behind a Tutoring Guarantee too thinly. By setting clear expectations for dosage – funding at least 15 hours per student, to be delivered within a set time period, such as the equivalent of a school term – they can manage the risk that the impact of a future Tutoring Guarantee is undermined by insufficient dosage. In this context, 15 hours is a funded minimum, calibrated to protect the impact of the scheme as a whole. This minimum recognises that some individual students may benefit from a higher dosage, and schools and colleges should be encouraged to identify and fund this need from existing budgets where appropriate; it also recognises that even the best-run tutoring intervention is unlikely to achieve 100% attendance from every student, and so the funded level of dosage should be high enough to account for some attrition.

5. Tutoring should be delivered in groups of no more than four

Tutoring is conventionally defined as 'a personalised educational support intervention, where a tutor, who possesses expertise in a specific subject, provides tailored one-to-one or small-group instruction to students.'⁴⁵ In particular, the evidence suggests that tutoring is so impactful because the small-group setting allows tutors to personalise their approach to the particular needs of students and address key learning gaps.⁴⁶ As the American policy expert Liz Cohen has put it: 'Teachers... can't give 30 kids the individual opportunity to showcase their practice and get specific feedback... [and we know] that demonstrating competence is key to building motivation... towards learning.'⁴⁷

The EEF Toolkit highlights the effectiveness of both one-to-one and small-group tutoring programmes, with the former leading to approximately five additional months' progress over the course of the year on average,⁴⁸ and the latter four additional months' progress.⁴⁹ As the EEF notes, due to the higher cost of one-to-one tuition, small-group programmes may be a cost-effective solution to providing targeted support. The largest UK-based randomised controlled trial (RCT) was conducted with a 1:3 ratio⁵⁰ and a review of international evidence found similar effect sizes for tutoring in groups of 1:2 and 1:3.⁵¹ Some programs with strong evidence of impact operate with groups of four students, which can be operationally easier for schools and allow for students to spend part of the session working in pairs. However, once group size increases

⁴⁴ Ofsted (2023). *Independent review of tutoring in schools: phase 1 findings*.

⁴⁵ Harrison, W. & Higgins, S. (2023). *A global evidence review for policymakers: findings from meta-analyses of tutoring*. Education Development Trust

⁴⁶ Nickow, A., Oreopoulos, P. & Quan, V. (2020). *The impressive effects of tutoring on preK-12 learning: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the experimental evidence*. National Bureau of Economic Research. Working Paper 27476.

⁴⁷ Quoted in: Petrilli, M. J. (2026, January 16). *Liz Cohen and Kevin Huffman make the case for tutoring*. SCHOOLED.

⁴⁸ Education Endowment Foundation. (n.d.). *One to one tuition*. Teaching and Learning Toolkit.

⁴⁹ Education Endowment Foundation. (n.d.). *Small group tuition*. Teaching and Learning Toolkit.

⁵⁰ Torgerson, J. et al. (2018). *Tutor Trust: Affordable Primary Tuition*. Education Endowment Foundation.

⁵¹ Robinson, C. D. & Loeb, S. (2021). *High-Impact Tutoring: State of the Research and Priorities for Future Learning*. EdWorking Paper, 21-384. Annenberg Institute, Brown University.

above four, the evidence for impact is less consistent, and for groups above six or seven the EEF warns of a noticeable reduction in effectiveness. Evidence from a meta-analysis of 96 randomised evaluations of tutoring programmes from pre-school to the end of secondary school shows consistent effects of tutoring across a range of programme characteristics. However, it showed tutoring was most effective when delivered in a one-to-one format when it targets younger students and in small groups for older ones.⁵²

Maintaining an optimal group size was a key implementation challenge in the NTP, where the initial group size limit of 1:3 was loosened to 1:6 over the course of the programme.⁵³ In some schools, it was common to have groups of more than eight in a tutoring session.⁵⁴ The same was true of colleges in the 16-19 Tuition Fund.

A Tutoring Guarantee should set clear expectations for group size, mandating a maximum ratio of 1:4, while recognising that some students – such as those with SEND – may need a smaller group size, or even one-to-one tutoring. The funding levels for the Tutoring Guarantee should be set to reflect this necessary variation.

6. Give schools and colleges the support they need to commission high-quality tutoring, delivered in-house or by external tutors

In deciding how to structure the delivery of a Tutoring Guarantee, policymakers face three key questions.

First, who should provide the tutoring?

Some tutoring is delivered ‘in house’ by schools and colleges themselves – for example, by employing additional teachers for the purpose, paying existing teachers an allowance to deliver tutoring on top of their normal teaching load, or training other staff (such as teaching assistants) to deliver tutoring. Alternatively, schools and colleges can make use of external tutoring programmes – usually run by an independent company or charity, but sometimes part of another organisation, like a university – which train, manage and (unless they are volunteers) pay their tutors to come into school or college to deliver tutoring. **A Tutoring Guarantee should allow schools and colleges to choose the mix of in-house and external tutoring that is right for their context.**

In-house tutoring sits within the control of school or college leaders, avoiding the need for coordination with an external provider. Tutors likely already know the students and are well-positioned to ensure that the tutoring complements classroom teaching – indeed, the tutor and the classroom teacher may be the same person. Evidence from a meta-analysis of 96 randomised evaluations of tutoring programmes found that tutoring was most effective when delivered by teachers or paraprofessionals, when it was delivered during the school day rather than after school.⁵⁵ Ofsted described how schools in the NTP often preferred to organise and quality-

⁵² Nickow, A. et al. (2020). *The transformative potential of tutoring for PreK-12 learning outcomes: Lessons from randomised evaluations*.

⁵³ McShane, A. (2024). *Hitting the target, but missing the point*. The New Britain Project.

⁵⁴ Ofsted (2023). *Independent review of tutoring in schools: phase 1 findings*.

⁵⁵ Nickow, A., Oreopoulos, P. & Quan, V. (2020). *The transformative potential of tutoring for PreK-12 learning outcomes: Lessons from randomised evaluations*. [Evidence-Review-The-Transformative-Potential-of-Tutoring.pdf](#)

assure tutoring in house, especially where they were able to use qualified teachers, although Ofsted also noted that schools did not always follow evidence-based guidance in the design of their in-house tutoring.⁵⁶

External tutoring programmes can draw on a wider pool of potential tutors than is available to any given school. Although these tutors must generally put additional effort into building rapport with students and aligning on their approach with classroom teachers, they can also bring specialist subject expertise (especially in primary schools) or act as an important role model, especially if they come from the same background as the students they are tutoring.⁵⁷ Experts interviewed for Public First's qualitative research argued that external tutoring programmes can provide greater consistency in tutor training, fidelity to evidence-based models and additionality (i.e. funds spent on tutoring rather than being used to offset other costs) than in-house tutoring. That said, because of the unregulated nature of the tutoring market, there is no guarantee that external tutors have been effectively trained or that their tutoring is aligned to the school curriculum – both of which are important features of high-impact tutoring.⁵⁸

Second, what role should government play?

In the NTP, the government centrally commissioned a cadre of Tuition Partners to offer external tutoring programmes for schools, and a partner to recruit and train Academic Mentors for placement as employees in schools, while providing ringfenced funding to colleges and other post-16 settings via the 16-19 Tuition Fund. From the second year of the programme, the government also provided subsidy for tutoring that was commissioned or provided in-house by schools themselves (School-Led Tutoring). Given the complexity of these arrangements and the circumstances of NTP's implementation – including the widely reported underperformance of the government's main contractor in the second year⁵⁹ – it is difficult to say with confidence which strand of the government's approach was most impactful. For example, although Ofsted found higher satisfaction with School-Led Tutoring than Tuition Partners,⁶⁰ schools often used School-Led Tutoring funds to contract directly with external programmes on the Tuition Partners list, to the extent that – in one expert's words – 'The routes basically were irrelevant'.⁶¹ A better conclusion is that the government took a scattergun approach, which prioritised take up of tutoring over impact.⁶²

The consensus from experts, teachers and parents (per Public First's research) is that **schools and colleges are better placed to commission tutoring than central government**, which is consistent with the lessons

⁵⁶ Ofsted (2023). *Independent review of tutoring in schools: phase 1 findings*.

⁵⁷ Simons, J., Burtonshaw, S. & Yates, W. (2025). *Past lessons, future vision – evolving state-funded tutoring for the future*. Public First.

⁵⁸ Robinson, C. D. & Loeb, S. (2021). *High-Impact Tutoring: State of the Research and Priorities for Future Learning*. EdWorking Paper, 21-384. Annenberg Institute, Brown University.

⁵⁹ Davies, N., & Hoddinott, S. (2022). *Randstad episode shows government has still not learnt lessons from past procurement failures*. Institute for Government.

⁶⁰ Ofsted (2023). *Independent review of tutoring in schools: phase 1 findings*.

⁶¹ Simons, J., Burtonshaw, S. & Yates, W. (2025). *Past lessons, future vision – evolving state-funded tutoring for the future*. Public First.

⁶² McShane, A. (2024). *Hitting the target, but missing the point*. The New Britain Project.

from the NTP, the wider evidence on the importance of embedding tutoring within the wider educational experience and Covid-era lessons from the United States.⁶³

However, **government does have an important role to play in supporting schools, colleges and tutoring providers to deliver an offer that is consistent with the principles of high-impact tutoring**. In particular, government should:

- **Accredit external tutoring programmes**. Validate which providers meet baseline standards (e.g. safeguarding practices, tutor training, alignment with evidence-based pedagogy and the National Curriculum) and make this validation a minimum requirement for tutoring funded through the Tutoring Guarantee. Signal which providers have higher levels of evidence for their quality and impact (e.g. via 'gold' rating). Accreditation processes could leverage lessons learned from what the DfE already does for phonics programmes.⁶⁴ It could have a collateral benefit of helping families make more informed decisions about quality when engaging private tutors.
- **Support schools to train their own high-quality tutors**. Develop national qualifications and fund a regional network of training providers to help schools and colleges upskill staff without qualified teacher status to deliver in-house tutoring. Intentionally developing a cadre of tutors in the school workforce has been shown, by research in the United States,⁶⁵ to strengthen the pipeline of applicants into teaching, and could help reduce teacher workloads (thus improving retention).
- **Validate technology (such as AI tools) that can assist in-school tutoring**. AI tools have the potential to multiply the impact of in-school tutors, both as a tool for students to use in tutoring sessions and as a means of upskilling tutors, supporting them to be more consistent and evidence based in their practice. Guidance and validation from government is essential to help schools navigate the options and identify high-quality tools in this rapidly changing marketplace.
- **Provide (or commission) infrastructure to help schools and colleges find external providers**. This is especially important in areas of the country where the tutoring market is less mature and where there are fewer potential candidates to train as in-house tutors – e.g. rural and coastal areas.

Implementation of a Tutoring Guarantee would take place in a very different context from the NTP, which was implemented at speed, alongside a host of other Covid-related demands, and with very little support for schools. With a sufficient lead-in period and effective communication, the package of supports proposed above has the potential to permanently strengthen tutoring capacity and practice in England.

⁶³ Cohen, L. (2025). *The future of tutoring: Lessons from 10,000 School District Tutoring Initiatives*.

⁶⁴ Department for Education. (2023). *Validation of systematic synthetic phonics programmes: supporting documentation*.

⁶⁵ Jung, J. et al. (2025). *Tutor-to-Teacher Pipeline: The Effect of Working as a Tutor through Teach For America Ignite on Applications to the Corps Teaching Program*. National Student Support Accelerator.

Third, what steps should be taken to ensure the inclusion of young people who are not in formal education?

Schools and colleges provide a universal service. They are the government's main delivery mechanism for closing the attainment gap. However, at present, a significant minority of young people are not regularly attending a formal education setting, and some families have become disengaged from the system. In addition to a core Tutoring Guarantee, commissioned by schools and colleges, **there may be a case to support tutoring that happens at weekends, in holidays, or outside of schools in approved third-party settings** (for example, in supplementary schooling, or in a community provider that works closely with families and schools). The strongest model for commissioning such support would likely be through grants to bodies that are close to communities, such as academy trusts, local authorities or mayoral combined authorities. This aligns with the plans for stronger education-community partnerships set out in the National Youth Strategy.⁶⁶

An alternative approach (and indeed, an alternative to a school- and college-led model in general) would be to establish a 'voucher-based' scheme, whereby the families of eligible students are able to choose a tutoring provider and secure tutoring up to an allotted budget. However, this approach poses some significant challenges: the risk of low or uneven take-up; the impact for students who qualify but whose parents do not choose to use their voucher; how to ensure that tutoring complements students' wider education without the involvement of a school, college or alternative provider; how to administer the issuing and redemption of vouchers without recreating the bureaucracy of the NTP; and how to avoid the quality and fraud risks seen with previous 'voucher-based' schemes like Individual Learning Accounts.⁶⁷ A number of American states which attempted to roll out voucher-based tutoring schemes post-Covid struggled to get them off the ground.⁶⁸

7. Make it a fully-funded, multi-year offer

Qualitative research conducted by Public First in 2025 found that teachers and school leaders saw dedicated funding as a prerequisite for a successful tutoring programme, given the many competing pressures on schools' budgets.⁶⁹ Despite the strong evidence for the impact of tutoring, schools and colleges will always struggle to prioritise an intervention that is – by definition – supplemental when they are struggling to cover their core running costs. However, as recent research for Nesta confirms, government subsidies can act as a 'powerful tool for overcoming financial barriers to participation' in evidence-based programming.⁷⁰

Under the NTP, ringfenced funding was allocated to schools according to the number of students on their rolls in receipt of Pupil Premium and a maximum rate per hour of tutoring (£18 for mainstream schools and £47 for special schools or other special or alternative provision settings).⁷¹ This ensured that allocations were informed

⁶⁶ Department for Culture, Media & Sport. (2025) *Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy*.

⁶⁷ Public Accounts Committee. (2002). *Individual Learning Accounts* (Report No. 10). House of Commons..

⁶⁸ Cohen, L. (2025). *The future of tutoring: Lessons from 10,000 School District Tutoring Initiatives*.

⁶⁹ Simons, J., Burtonshaw, S. & Yates, W. (2025). *Past lessons, future vision – evolving state-funded tutoring for the future*. Public First.

⁷⁰ Nesta. (n.d.) *Case study: How can evidence-based education programmes be effectively scaled up in England?*

⁷¹ Department for Education. (2025). *National Tutoring Programme (NTP) grant funding: conditions of grant for 2023 to 2024 academic year*.

by an objective measure of need while protecting public value for money, insofar as the hourly rate was capped to prevent tutoring providers from exploiting the new funding to raise prices.

However, two features of the NTP funding approach have been identified as particularly problematic.⁷² First, the level of subsidy available tapered from 75% in the first year of the programme to 50% by the fourth year. This, combined with relatively late announcement of allocations and ambiguity about the speed at which subsidy would disappear, made it difficult for schools to plan for tutoring as part of their budgets. Second, any unused funds were ‘clawed back’ at the end of the academic year – amounting to £134 million, or 40% of allocated funds, in 2022/23 alone. The risk of clawback, given the wider challenges of implementing a new intervention during a pandemic, became a significant deterrent to school participation in the NTP.

By contrast, the 16-19 Tuition Fund was a grant (based on a formula calculating levels of prior attainment and disadvantage) rather than a subsidy, with no requirement for colleges to match-fund and no provision for clawback.⁷³ This was better received by the sector as promoting greater stability.

A future Tutoring Guarantee should learn the lessons of the NTP and avoid a funding approach that risks reputational damage and low uptake. A model similar to the 16-19 Tuition Fund – grants to schools and colleges, weighted to align with the government’s new approach to disadvantage-based funding – would achieve this.

An alternative approach would be to invite schools and colleges to apply for funding. While this might give government more in-built levers to incentivise quality – for example, making funds conditional on a commitment to use them in accordance with the principles of high-impact tutoring – it would create an additional barrier to participation in the scheme, and could make it harder to target support to the students most in need.

8. Require accountability without excessive bureaucracy

In introducing a new Tutoring Guarantee, policymakers need a means of assuring that public money is not being misused and that the funding is achieving its desired policy objective – i.e. that high-quality tutoring is actually taking place, and is being used to narrow the attainment gap.

The NTP involved elaborate reporting requirements, backed up with high stakes (the ‘clawback’). Although the NTP did not suffer from the widespread fraud that affected some Covid-era programmes, such as business loans and medical PPE, this approach to accountability had significant unintended consequences. The administrative burden associated with the NTP was large for both Tuition Partners and schools, particularly in the second year of the programme (one school leader described it as ‘absolutely immense’). The vast majority of senior leaders reported that the NTP had increased their workload. Specifically: the central contractor’s

⁷² Simons, J., Burtonshaw, S. & Yates, W. (2025). *Past lessons, future vision – evolving state-funded tutoring for the future*. Public First.

⁷³ Education and Skills Funding Agency. (2024). *16 to 19 tuition fund for academic year 2023 to 2024*.

information portal, through which schools were required to report data, was difficult to use; and schools were prohibited from using NTP funds for administration and management to help offset the burden.⁷⁴

Despite this level of bureaucracy, programme evaluations noted that effect sizes for the NTP were smaller than might have been anticipated based on previous studies of small-group tuition. Although this can partly be explained by differences in evaluation design, availability of data and capacity challenges (e.g. supply of tutors),⁷⁵ it is also clear that the NTP's heavy-handed approach to accountability did not lead to programme fidelity: the programme did not always reach the disadvantaged students who would have benefited most, many students received lower than optimal dosage and were tutored in larger than optimal groups.

Other education systems also experienced disappointing levels of impact from their Covid-era tutoring programmes. In New South Wales, unclear guidance was found to have resulted in tutoring not reaching the intended target group of students.⁷⁶ A major US study looking at the use of federal funds for tutoring reported many participating schools were unable to deliver enough tutoring to produce the significant academic impacts documented in pre-pandemic studies – chiefly because students did not receive the optimal dosage.⁷⁷ Some high-profile American commentators have put this down to a lack of accountability for impact⁷⁸ and many of the state governments that have subsequently continued to invest in tutoring have adopted measures to improve targeting and transparency around what is being delivered.⁷⁹

The 16-19 Tuition Fund had lighter-touch accountability arrangements than the NTP. Colleges were simply required to submit an annual statement of activity, reporting how they had spent their funds (similar to what schools submit to account for Pupil Premium spending), although they faced tighter requirements around student targeting than schools did under NTP. Research suggests that statements of activity were often vague and were not monitored closely by the government. This relatively weak accountability framework also failed to prevent some colleges from implementing tuition with larger than optimal groups of students.⁸⁰

The key lesson from Covid-era tutoring programmes is that there must be transparency around programme fidelity (unlike what happened in the US and New South Wales), but without creating an accountability regime that is counterproductive (like the NTP) or ineffectual (like the 16-19 Tuition Fund). Accountability arrangements for a future Tutoring Guarantee should proceed from the basis that schools and colleges are already held accountable for their use of public funds and the quality of education they provide via their funding arrangements and Ofsted inspections. Government should therefore ensure that it has the information needed to evaluate the impact of the programme nationally and feed into existing accountability at the school and college level, but with the minimum of bureaucratic burden.

⁷⁴ Lynch, S. et al. (2022) *The National Tutoring Programme Year 2: Implementation and Process Evaluation*. NFER.

⁷⁵ Department for Education (2023). *Independent evaluation of the National Tutoring Programme Year 2: Impact Evaluation*.

⁷⁶ Audit Office of New South Wales (2021). *COVID Intensive Learning Support Program*.

⁷⁷ Bhatt, M. P. et al (2025). *Personalised Learning Initiative Interim Report: Findings from 2023-24*. The University of Chicago Education Lab.

⁷⁸ Huffman, K. quoted in: Petrilli, M. J. (2026, January 16). *Liz Cohen and Kevin Huffman make the case for tutoring*. SCHOOLED.

⁷⁹ Jacobson, L. (2026). *COVID Relief Funds are Gone, But More States Commit to High-Impact Tutoring*. The 74.

⁸⁰ Simons, J., Burtonshaw, S. & Yates, W. (2025). *Past lessons, future vision – evolving state-funded tutoring for the future*. Public First.

Schools already report on which students have received tutoring via the Termly School Census.⁸¹ Rather than create a new reporting mechanism, the government should consider expanding the Census items to include:

- The subject(s) in which a student received tutoring
- How many hours of tutoring they received
- The average number of students present in tutoring sessions, and
- Whether tutoring was delivered by a qualified teacher or an accredited external programme.

These student-level data would allow the government to calculate key indicators of quality and impact – such as dosage, group size and proportion of recipients who were disadvantaged – without schools having to calculate and report those statistics manually. The government should work with providers of school management information systems (MIS) to ensure that the data can be collected seamlessly by recording attendance at each tutoring session, and ensure an equivalent arrangement can be implemented for colleges.

With clear insights into how schools and colleges are using funds for tutoring, the government would be well-placed to evaluate the impact of the Tutoring Guarantee nationally and to put in place a proportionate framework of accountability. In particular the government should:

- Work with Ofsted to develop expectations for how data on tutoring is used in inspections to praise effective practice, challenge ineffective practice and make recommendations for improvement.
- Write to schools and colleges whose data suggests low-fidelity implementation (and/or to their governing bodies or academy trusts).
- Celebrate high-fidelity implementation – for example, by awarding a ‘badge’ or award, or even paying a financial bonus (although this would need to be carefully calibrated to avoid constraining the scale of the Tutoring Guarantee via ‘deadweight’ costs).

The overall accountability framework should reinforce clear expectations for delivering quality and value for public money, while positioning tutoring as an integrated part of how schools and colleges deliver better outcomes for students, not an add-on requirement or additional burden.

9. Harness the potential of AI for the most disadvantaged students

Technology has been presented as having the potential to:

- Make tutoring available in situations where traditional face-to-face sessions are operationally difficult
- Enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of human tutors, and even
- Act as a low-cost alternative to human tutoring.

⁸¹ Department for Education. (2026). *Complete the school census - Data items 2025 to 2026 – Guidance*.

Tutoring can be delivered effectively via a screen. While most research has focused on in-person tutoring, there is evidence that tutoring can also be effective when delivered at a distance. Evaluations of a blended tutoring model in Chicago and New York City public schools⁸² and fully virtual models in Massachusetts⁸³ and Kansas City, Missouri found that primary-age students made learning gains equivalent to what would be expected for in-person only tutoring.⁸⁴ Online programmes implemented as a response to Covid – for example, Italy’s Online Tutoring Programme⁸⁵ – also had a positive impact on student outcomes. Implementation difficulties with England’s NTP led Ofsted to conclude that ‘remote learning was ineffective for the vast majority of pupils’.⁸⁶ However, on balance, the evidence shows that, when implemented well and integrated effectively within students’ wider learning, virtual delivery can be an effective way of expanding access to tutoring, especially where suitable tutors are in short supply in a particular geographical area, or where circumstances (like the pandemic) make face-to-face delivery impractical.⁸⁷

As well as widening access, recent developments in artificial intelligence (AI) demonstrate how **technology can enhance the impact of human tutors.** Evidence from the first RCT on a human-AI system in live tutoring, looking at students aged 8-14 in historically underserved communities, found that students working with AI-supported tutors were four percentage points more likely to master topics. Students of lower-rated and less-experienced tutors experienced the greatest benefit, with these students nine percentage points more likely to master topics.⁸⁸ A review of evidence by the Brookings Institution (a major US think tank) also inferred, from evidence of AI tools helping teachers to improve their lesson planning,⁸⁹ that AI could also support tutors, particularly less experienced tutors, to improve their effectiveness.⁹⁰ In short, AI applications have strong potential to improve the scalability of human-led tutoring by increasing consistency between tutors and reducing costs associated with tutor training. A forthcoming study for Action Tutoring will explore whether AI-supported tutoring can be deployed effectively with groups of up to 20 (mostly disadvantaged) students, greatly reducing the cost-per-student and increasing the potential for scale of a hybrid approach with this population.⁹¹

But can AI ever *replace* human tutors, making the benefits of tutoring widely available at a fraction of the cost? The first important consideration to keep in mind here is that research on AI tutoring tools is in its infancy. By comparison, the evidence base for human-led tutoring is uniquely strong for an educational intervention. At least 165 RCTs have evidenced the impact of human-led tutoring in a wide variety of settings, with a wide range of student demographics – a high bar for demonstrating equivalent impact. Although the evidence base is growing all the time, all the currently available studies on AI tutoring tools have limitations

⁸² Robinson, C. et al. (2021). *Accelerating student learning with high-dosage tutoring*. EdResearch for Recovery.

⁸³ Neitzel, A. J. (2026). *Evaluation of Ignite Reading Virtual Literacy Tutoring in Massachusetts: Year 2 Quantitative Findings, school year 2024–25*.

⁸⁴ Hsieh, H., et al. (2026). *Hoot Reading & Kansas City Public Schools: 2024-2025 RCT Report*. Stanford University.

⁸⁵ Minea-Pic, A. (2023). *Catching up on lost learning opportunities: Research and policy evidence on key learning recovery strategies*. OECD Education Working Papers No. 292.

⁸⁶ Ofsted (2023). *Independent review of tutoring in schools: phase 1 findings*.

⁸⁷ Cohen, L. (2025). *The future of tutoring: Lessons from 10,000 School District Tutoring Initiatives*.

⁸⁸ Wang, R. et al. (2024). *Tutor CoPilot: A Human-AI Approach for Scaling Real-Time Expertise*. EdWorking Paper No. 24-1054. Annenberg Institute.

⁸⁹ Keppler, et al. (2025). *Backwards Planning with Generative AI: Case Study Evidence from US K12 Teachers*.

⁹⁰ Burns, M. (2026, January 27). *What the research shows about generative AI in tutoring*. Brookings.

⁹¹ Fox, J. (2026, March 4). *The AI revolution: why equity must drive the future of tutoring*. Action Tutoring.

that mean their results cannot be extrapolated to imply those tools are a like-for-like alternative to human-led tutoring for school-age children; eight of the most recent leading studies are summarised in the [Appendix](#).

What is clear is that **generative AI (genAI) ‘is now beginning to address longstanding limitations in traditional intelligent tutoring systems’, asking and responding to questions and providing feedback on open-ended answers in a personalised, naturalistic, conversational manner.**⁹² A recent small-scale RCT found that students using a genAI maths tutoring tool (LearnLM), supervised by a human, performed at least as well as students chatting virtually with human tutors on each learning outcome measured, and were 5.5 percentage points more likely to solve novel problems on subsequent topics than those who received tutoring from human tutors alone.⁹³ EdTech expert Daisy Christodoulou has noted this study as a promising model that could be scalable in a traditional classroom, but she has urged caution about extrapolating the findings as evidence for genAI tutoring in a completely online setting. She also notes the ongoing challenge of genAI models hallucinating erroneous answers (even if, like LearnLM, they can be trained to do this very infrequently) and the fact that much of the research is on LLMs in relation to maths education, and not applicable to other subjects.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, we should be optimistic about the potential of AI tools to add value to classroom teaching, providing more frequent, personalised opportunities for practice and feedback to reinforce learning and reduce the number of students who fall behind to begin with.

It is much less clear that AI tools could replicate *all* the benefits of working with a human tutor. **The relationship between tutor and student is an important element of tutoring.**⁹⁵ A major review of international evidence on AI in education recently argued that where genAI systems are used as a substitute (rather than a supplement) to a human tutor or teacher, this eliminates ‘the embodied experiences and relationships so critical to human learning’, noting that ‘AI cannot discern whether student slowness indicates deep thinking, peer collaboration, fatigue, or disengagement – a contextual understanding that good educators develop through daily interaction’.⁹⁶ UCL’s Rose Luckin has pointed out the conceptual differences between what genAI tools aim to provide and the facets of learning that can be developed by a human tutor⁹⁷ and a review of the evidence by researchers in the United States concluded that – while impressive – ‘there is little evidence that generative AI alone can match the multifaceted nature of high-quality tutoring, which requires simultaneously predicting, understanding, and responding to a multiplicity of students’ emotional and cognitive needs’.⁹⁸ Recent DfE guidance on AI in education has made clear that ‘We expect developers and suppliers not to anthropomorphise products or create products that imply emotions, consciousness or

⁹² Burns, M. (2026, January 27). *What the research shows about generative AI in tutoring*. Brookings.

⁹³ Google & Eedi (2025). *AI tutoring can safely and effectively support students: An exploratory RCT in UK classrooms*.

⁹⁴ Christodoulou, D. (2026, January 11). *Maybe LLM tutors might be able to work... No More Marking*.

⁹⁵ Nickow, A., et al. (2020). *The impressive effects of tutoring on preK-12 learning: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the experimental evidence*. National Bureau of Economic Research. Working Paper 27476.

⁹⁶ Burns, M., et al. (2026). *A new direction for students in an AI world: prosper, prepare, protect*. Brookings Institution.

⁹⁷ Luckin, R. (2026, February 20). *AI tutors support 16 percent of learning. what about the other 84 percent?* Social Science Space

⁹⁸ Vanacore, K. et al. (2026). *The Path to Conversational AI Tutors: integrating tutoring best practices and targeted technologies to produce scalable AI agents*

personhood, agency or identity’,⁹⁹ indicating that it may actually be undesirable for an AI-tutoring application to attempt to replicate relational aspects of a human-to-human tutor relationship, even if it were possible.

Empirically, studies suggest that **hybrid approaches may offer greater promise than attempting to automate the tutoring experience completely**. A Carnegie Mellon University study found that human-AI tutoring resulted in students making significantly greater progress over a year (0.36 grade levels), compared to AI-only tutoring, and that students actually appear to gain more learning from time spent using the AI tool if they also worked with a human tutor.¹⁰⁰ This may be in part because AI tools free up human tutors to focus more of their effort on the relationship building and socioemotional support that many students need to successfully engage with the AI.¹⁰¹ Likewise the Brookings Institution argued that ‘the optimal tutoring model appears to be one of human-AI hybrid vigor’.¹⁰² A recent literature review from Stanford University ‘**Current research supports leveraging AI tools to enhance tutor effectiveness and educator capacity, rather than serving as a replacement for high-impact tutoring**’.¹⁰³

Lastly, **there is a risk that AI tutoring tools could prove ineffective – or even counterproductive – in closing the attainment gap if they are deployed without care or if their deployment means that disadvantaged students miss out on the benefits of working with a human tutor**. We know that students come to learning from unequal starting places. For example, a recent study of genAI tutoring in higher education found that that students at more selective institutions were more likely to exhibit ‘deep engagement and routine-learning engagement... [i.e. they used the tool] more for day-to-day learning rather than short-term assignment completion or exam cramming’, suggesting students’ prior levels of knowledge, motivation and self-regulatory capacity affect how much they benefit from access to genAI tutoring.¹⁰⁴ In another study, American elementary students from predominantly disadvantaged backgrounds were given dedicated time to use an AI literacy platform independently averaged only two to five minutes of use per week, compared to suggested dosage of 30 minutes; students who used the AI tool were less likely to receive special education services and more likely to be higher achieving.¹⁰⁵ Researchers at the Brookings Institution have also warned that poorly designed or inappropriately used tools risk undermining students’ cognitive, social and emotional development, and trust between students and teachers, and cautioned that low-cost AI tools could, paradoxically, deepen educational inequality because ‘the poorest education

⁹⁹ Department for Education. (2026). *Generative AI: product safety standards*.

¹⁰⁰ Gurung, et al. (2025). *Human tutoring improves the impact of AI tutor use on learning outcomes*. In: Cristea, A.I., Walker, E., Lu, Y., Santos, O.C., Isotani, S. (eds) *Artificial Intelligence in Education. AIED 2025. Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, vol 15880. Springer, Cham.

¹⁰¹ Thomas, D. et al. (2024). *Improving Student Learning with Hybrid Human-AI Tutoring: A Three-Study Quasi Experimental Investigation*. In *The 14th Learning Analytics and Knowledge Conference (LAK '24)*

¹⁰² Burns, M. (2026, January 27). *What the research shows about generative AI in tutoring*. Brookings.

¹⁰³ SCALE Initiative. (2026). *AI Tutoring is Not a Monolith: What We Actually Know*. National Student Support Accelerator at Stanford University.

¹⁰⁴ Chen, Y., et al. (2026). *Not all students engage alike: Multi-Institution Patterns in GenAI tutor use*.

¹⁰⁵ Robinson, C. D. et al. (2026). *Access is Not Enough: Human Support Improves Engagement with AI Tutoring*. EdWorkingPaper No. 26-1451. Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

systems will employ AI to teach students while students in wealthy education systems will be taught by AI and human teachers’.¹⁰⁶

As the table below illustrates, we should embrace the promise of technology and AI to enhance tutoring while being realistic about the limitations:

AI can...	AI can't yet...	AI can't ever...
- Provide tutor-style support in maths, under human supervision and within a classroom setting (LearnLM) - Enhance classroom learning in English, so that students have more secure understanding and are therefore less likely to need extra help (World Bank Nigeria) - Support better learning outcomes than classroom teaching, where students have a high level of capability and motivation for independent study (Harvard Physics; Penn/Taiwan Reinforcement Learning) - Enhance effectiveness of human tutors (Stanford Tutor CoPilot)	- Act as an unsupervised alternative to a human tutor – current studies required the AI to be supervised to monitor for errors or hallucinations (LearnLM) or showed worse outcomes where students used the AI unsupervised (Carnegie Mellon Human-AI tutoring) - Provide effective tutoring across all the subject domains, age groups and student demographics for which human tutoring has been proven effective	- Replace the value of the relationship built between tutor and student (Brookings, Vanacore, Luckin) - Act as a vehicle for wider civic engagement in education – e.g. through volunteering as a tutor (Cohen) - Change the fact that students come to learning from different starting points – in terms of motivation, prior knowledge, external support – and that this is a key driver of the attainment gap (Multi-Institution GenAI Tutor Use, Brookings, Brown student engagement)

Human-led tutoring is the strongest tool we have for closing the attainment gap. We should absolutely be looking for ways to enhance and scale the impact of this proven intervention using AI-human hybrid approaches. The precise role played by humans will vary depending on the specific model of tutoring being used and is likely to evolve as technology, and the evidence base for deploying it effectively, develops. Models that optimise for impact may focus on how AI can assist a conventional human tutor; models that optimise for scale may make more use of student-facing AI tools, with a human tutor or teacher supervising learning. Government should support schools and colleges (see Design Principle 6) to make sound, evidence-based decisions in commissioning the model or mix of models that best meets their needs. In particular, government should create transparency about the extent to which AI tools have been designed to help close the attainment gap for disadvantaged students and the risks and limitations that still need to be managed by humans.

But we should absolutely *not* leave our strongest tool on the shelf while we wait for a like-for-like alternative to human-led tutoring that, at best, does not exist yet, in all likelihood will never reproduce all the benefits, and at worst could end up widening the attainment gap while the most advantaged students enjoy the best of human-led tutoring and AI tools.

¹⁰⁶ Burns, M., et al. (2026). *A new direction for students in an AI world: prosper, prepare, protect*. Brookings Institution.

Conclusion and next steps

Tutoring is impactful, it is popular with the public, and the pandemic showed that it is possible to deliver at the sort of scale needed to make a major contribution to closing the attainment gap. We know more than ever about what it takes to achieve impact at scale, and we now have an opportunity to use that knowledge to realise the true potential of tutoring as a system lever for educational equality.

This is not an unrealistic aspiration. In the United States, even though Covid-era funding has now ended, access to tutoring is increasingly seen as something that should be a permanent fixture in schools, with over half of state governments offering funding for tutoring.¹⁰⁷ It is time for England to follow suit. As we look towards the next election we call on all political parties to commit to a Tutoring Guarantee that:

- Ensures fidelity to the principles of high-impact tutoring
- Empowers schools and colleges to commission the package of tutoring that is best suited to closing the attainment gap in their local context, and
- Harnesses the promise of new technology to close, not widen, the attainment gap.

We invite colleagues and organisations across the education sector – and anyone who believes in the potential of tutoring – to join us in this movement.

This policy brief was prepared by [Public First](#) as part of a project funded by [Impetus](#). It is a living document, expected to evolve with the evidence base.

¹⁰⁷ Jacobson, L. (2026). *COVID Relief Funds are Gone, But More States Commit to High-Impact Tutoring*. The 74.

Appendix: Recent leading studies on AI tutoring

Study	Context / Method	Results	Limitations for policy
LearnLMⁱ	RCT with 165 students in five UK secondary schools. Compared 'static hints', virtual human maths tutors and a genAI tutoring model (LearnLM) that was 'pedagogically fine-tuned' and prompted to adopt a Socratic questioning approach.	Students using the supervised genAI tool performed slightly better than those with human tutors and were more able to solve new kinds of problems on subsequent topics (66.2% of the time, compared to 60.7% with human tutors).	Small experimental study. Only covered maths. Conducted in a traditional classroom setting. Expert tutors reviewed and retained full control to edit or replace LearnLM's drafts, ensuring social-emotional nuance and appropriate pacing.
Penn/Taiwan Reinforcement Learningⁱⁱ	RCT with 770 high school students in Taipei. Compared two genAI tools teaching the Python coding language. One followed a fixed series of practice problems; used a 'reinforcement learning algorithm' to adapt problem sequences to students' needs.	Students using the tools with the reinforcement learning algorithm increased unassisted final exam performance by 0.15 standard deviations (equivalent to 6-9 months of schooling). Students with less prior skill showed the strongest gains.	Shows positive evidence for adaptive learning in a very specific learning to context: coding in Python; students were motivated by a requirement to complete the online modules (using the tool) to gain a government-endorsed certification.
World Bank, Nigeriaⁱⁱⁱ	RCT with ~750 students (aged ~15) in nine schools in Nigeria. Compared students who received after school English tuition from Microsoft Copilot with a control group who just attended their regular classes.	Effect size of participating in AI tutoring on performance in English assessments of 0.23 standard deviations.	Students were trained on using the AI tool and supervised during sessions by a teacher.
Harvard Physics^{iv}	RCT with 194 undergraduate physics students at Harvard University. Compared students using an AI tutoring tool against a control who received 'active learning' classroom instruction.	Students using the AI tool achieved more than double the learning gains relative to the pre-test baseline and reported feeling significantly more engaged and motivated.	Small experimental study. Subjects were adults who evidently had high levels of prior knowledge in the subject domain and likely had very high levels of motivation for learning.
Stanford Tutor CoPilot^v	RCT with 782 tutors and 1,787 students (aged 8-14) in the southern United States. Compared students <i>whose tutors</i> had access to a Tutor CoPilot AI tool in sessions to a control group (human tutors without access to an AI tool).	Students whose tutors had access to the AI tool were 4%pts more likely to master maths topics. AI-assisted tutors were more likely to use effective pedagogical techniques. Students of 'lower-rated' tutors were 9%pts more likely to master topics.	Provides evidence of how AI can make human tutors more effective (particularly less experienced ones), rather than providing a substantially cheaper alternative to conventional human tutoring.
Carnegie Mellon Human-AI tutoring^{vi}	Propensity matching study of 673 students (aged 12-13) in the United States. Compared maths performance of students who had access to the i-Ready AI tutoring tool plus 1:1 virtual support from a human tutor with a control who only had access to i-Ready.	Students receiving human-AI tutoring made significantly better progress (0.36 grade levels) over a year. For each standard deviation increase in AI tool use, the human-AI group improved by 0.28 standard deviations on state tests, compared to 0.06 for the AI-only group.	Not an RCT. Only covered maths. Only looked at one AI tool (although raises the question of whether all AI tools marketed for solo use should be tested against a human-AI comparator).
Multi-Institution GenAI Tutor Use^{vii}	Analysed interaction logs for a genAI tutoring tool from 10,000 classes across 573 higher education institutions. Comparing types of engagement with the AI tool over time and by course and selectivity of institution.	Students at more selective institutions were more likely to exhibit 'deep/routine-learning engagement... suggesting that GenAI Tutor was used more for day-to-day learning rather than short-term assignment completion or exam cramming'.	Not an RCT. Subjects were adults. Only looked at one AI tool (although authors consider it generalisable to other tools on the market). Limited analysis of student demographics beyond institutions attended.

Penn, Turkey^{viii}	RCT with nearly 1,000 high school maths students in Turkey. Compared unrestricted access to ChatGPT with a modified GPT Tutor (designed to guide students with hints rather than directly giving answers) and a control group with technological assistance.	Unrestricted access group performed 48% better than the control in a practice session, but 17% worse in an exam where they were not allowed the tool, suggesting that unrestricted AI inhibited their learning. GPT Tutor group performed 127% better than the control in the practice session and the same as the control group in the final exam.	Only covered maths, and in a context that is more akin to regular self-guided learning (e.g. homework) that catch-up tutoring. Highlights risks of unrestricted AI access for learning.
Brown student engagement, US^{ix}	Two RCTs with 355 elementary students (80%+ economically disadvantaged) using an AI literacy platform. Students were assigned either to use the AI platform independently or to use it with an in-person human tutor focused on engagement, motivation and troubleshooting rather than direct instruction. Students were expected to use the platform for at least two 30-minute sessions per week.	Despite dedicated session time, nearly half of students assigned to independent use never used the platform, and those who did averaged only 2–5 minutes per week. Human support increased platform use by around 1–4 minutes per week and increased engagement by 71–80%, but usage remained low and there was no improvement in reading achievement.	Only covered early literacy, with elementary students, and the human tutors supported engagement rather than providing direct instruction. Suggests that standalone access to AI is unlikely to secure sufficient dosage, especially for underserved students – students who used the AI tutor were less likely to receive special education services and more likely to be higher achieving.

ⁱ Google & Eedi (2025). *AI tutoring can safely and effectively support students: An exploratory RCT in UK classrooms.*

ⁱⁱ Chung, A. et al. (2026). *Effective Personalized AI Tutors via LLM-Guided Reinforcement Learning.*

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