

# Is the Catch-Up Programme Fit for Purpose?

## Introduction and background

This report from the House of Commons Education Committee provides an overview of the impact of the pandemic on pupils' learning. It calls on the government to re-focus its catch-up efforts and proposes several actions to achieve this aim.

## Key points

### The pandemic and learning loss

- The DfE did not place a duty on schools to provide remote learning until October 2020, 7 months after the first school closures. It should have happened much sooner.
- During the school closures, there was great variability in learning experiences and in access to technology. In June 2020, the University College London Institute of Education found that children locked down at home in the first lockdown in the UK spent an average of only 2.5 hours each day doing schoolwork, and that a fifth of pupils did no schoolwork at home, or less than one hour a day.
- Although schools are now open, there are ongoing high levels of pupil absence. As of 10 February 2022, COVID-19 related pupil absence in state-funded schools was 2.2 per cent, equating to 182,00 pupils. On-site attendance in state-funded schools was 90.3 per cent on 10 February, and the Department estimated that 7.5 per cent of teachers and school leaders were absent from open schools on this date.
- In a DfE report published in January 2022, pupils' mental health and wellbeing was reported as a major challenge. Variation between schools and lack of parental engagement were also highlighted.
- Research by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) and Renaissance Learning found that by the summer term 2021, primary-aged pupils had lost 0.9 months learning in reading and 2.2 months in mathematics. The same research identified a learning loss for secondary pupils of 1.2 months in reading.
- In November 2020, Ofsted reported that some of the most affected younger children had regressed. They had forgotten to eat with a knife and fork, and they had lost their early progress in numbers and words.
- The data point to regional variation with areas such as the North East and Yorkshire and Humber most affected.
- David Laws, Executive Chairman of the EPI, reported to the Education Committee that in December 2021 disadvantaged children in the most challenging communities could, in the worst case scenarios, be as much as 8 months behind in their learning.
- The catch-up initiatives include a universal catch-up premium, allocated on a per-pupil basis, a National Tutoring Programme, a Recovery Premium linked to the Pupil Premium, and funding to provide 16–19-year-old students with an additional 40 hours of tuition over the course of an academic year.
- Several stakeholders including the EPI, and the Association of School and College Leaders, have expressed concern that the funding allocated to date is insufficient. A proposed recovery plan by the EPI suggests £10-15 billion as an appropriate benchmark. The Department's own annual report from 2020-21 rated the risk of its measures to address lost learning being insufficient as "critical/very likely".
- The Education Committee recognises the commitment which the government has made to helping pupils to catch up. However, it criticises what it calls a 'spaghetti junction' approach which makes it difficult and time-consuming for schools to access the different pots of funding available.
- There has also been debate around how funding should be allocated. David Laws, Chair of the EPI, argues for a regional and local element, with a combination of individual and area-based recovery funding. Pupils who are FSM-eligible or living in areas of high deprivation would attract the most funding, with the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) informing how area-based catch-up funding should be allocated.

### Disadvantaged pupils and regional variations in learning loss

- According to the DfE, the attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils narrowed by 13 per cent at age 11 and 9 per cent at age 16 between 2011 and 2019. School closures have reversed much of this progress.
- Research commissioned by the DfE from January 2021 found that schools with high levels of disadvantage experienced greater levels of learning loss than other schools, particularly in secondary (2.2 months in schools with high free school meal eligibility and 1.5 months in schools with low free school meal eligibility).
- The Education Committee is concerned by the significant regional variations in learning loss. By the end of the autumn term 2020, research by the EPI

### Catch up funding

- Since June 2020, the government has invested in several schemes to help children to catch up with lost learning – expenditure has totalled around £5 billion.



found that average learning loss in maths for primary pupils ranged from 0.5 months in the South West to 5.3 months in Yorkshire and the Humber.

- A further report by the EPI in February 2021 identified 5 local areas with the largest grade gaps at GCSE. These were Knowsley (poorer students are 1.76 GCSE grades behind); Blackpool (1.69); Salford (1.66); Derby (1.65) and Sheffield (1.61). By contrast, most of the areas with the smallest grade gaps were in London.
- There were marked regional disparities in the take-up of the government's flagship National Tutoring Programme (NTP). By March 2021, it had reached 100 per cent of its target numbers of schools in the South-West of England and 96.1 per cent in the South-East, but just 58.8 per cent in the north-east, 58.9 per cent in Yorkshire and the Humber and 59.3 per cent in the North-West.
- The Education Committee is concerned about ongoing high levels of pupil absence in the wake of the pandemic. In December 2021, the DfE reported that persistent absence (defined as 10% or more of available school sessions) increased to 16.3 per cent in secondary schools in autumn 2020, compared with 15.0 per cent in 2019, excluding non-attendance in COVID-19 circumstances. This equates to 501,642 persistently absent pupils out of a total of around 3 million.
- In January 2022, a report by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) found that there were 93,514 "severely absent" pupils in mainstream and special schools in autumn 2020, and a further 6,000 severely absent pupils in alternative provision. These pupils were absent more often than they were present. This report also points out that schools with the most disadvantaged intake are 10 times more likely to have a class-worth of severely absent pupils.

### The National Tutoring Programme and Randstad

- The National Tutoring Programme (NTP) was launched in November 2020. It has 3 pillars – tuition partners, academic mentors, and school-led tutoring. Schools using the tuition partners route use an NTP approved list of tutors, with 70 per cent of tutoring costs in 2021-22 subsidised by the government. The academic mentors route involves the placement of mentors in schools by the NTP – the mentors work alongside teachers, and 90 per cent of the cost is covered in 2021-22. Schools opting for the school-led route receive a ring-fenced grant from the government to fund local tutoring provision for disadvantaged pupils.
- Since September 2021, Randstad have been providing the first 2 pillars. By December, the number of 'starts' for each pillar were: 230,000 for school-led tutoring, 52,000 for tuition partners, and 20,000 for academic mentors.
- Schools Week has calculated that the NTP has so far reached just 15 per cent of its overall target. To date, 10 per cent of the target for the tuition partners pillar of the NTP has been met (52,000 starts against a target of 524,000).
- Schools and tutoring providers have reported considerable issues with Randstad's systems which make it difficult to access tutoring. Witnesses who gave evidence reported that the programme was a "bureaucratic nightmare," and that Randstad's online tuition hub was "dysfunctional."
- The Department's first release of statistics about starts on the NTP did not provide any indication as to the

number of disadvantaged learners accessing the programme, or regional differences in take-up.

- The school-led tutoring pillar of the NTP has been more popular in terms of the number of starts to date, although there are concerns about quality control.
- The Committee is concerned about the tapering of the programme, with funding gradually reduced over the next 2 years.

### Mental health and resilience

- Having heard a range of evidence, the Education Committee believes that there is merit in extending opportunities for additional time spent on extra-curricular activities, including exercise and creative pursuits, to those children who may otherwise not enjoy those opportunities.
- Several studies are cited in the Committee's report, including research by the CSJ which drew on the findings of the 2003–2010 'extended services in schools' programme. In an evaluation of the 1,500 schools which extended their days to offer extra-curricular activities, 71 per cent of schools reported that this helped them engage with disadvantaged families and 69 per cent of schools found it had at least some influence in raising attainment.
- The pandemic has exacerbated an existing crisis in mental health, with as many as 1 in 6 children aged 6–16 years old now suffering from a probable mental health condition. There are particular concerns around social media and a lack of data. The Committee recognises the government's work in this area, including a commitment to grow the number of mental health support teams (MHST) in schools.

### Key recommendations

- Future investment in education recovery must be directed to schools, who know their pupils and their needs the best. Any future catch-up initiatives should direct funding to schools using existing mechanisms for identifying disadvantage. This would address the current 'spaghetti junction' of funding.
- To date, Randstad have been unable to provide key data setting out who was accessing the NTP and what take up was like in different parts of the country. The Committee recommends that the DfE should publish half termly information about how many children are accessing the programme, including information on pupil characteristics and regional breakdowns. If the NTP is not meeting its targets, the Department should terminate its contract with Randstad.
- The DfE must introduce a pilot of optional extra-curricular activities for children to help improve academic attainment and wellbeing. The pilot should be trialled in areas of disadvantage.
- The government must move faster on its commitment to make sure all schools have a senior mental health lead and access to mental support teams. All children should undergo a mental health and wellbeing assessment, and schools may wish to direct some of the recovery funding to address mental health difficulties.
- Ofsted should make it clear in their guidance that they will also look for evidence that schools have sought to identify and respond to the mental health and wellbeing needs of their students.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/9251/documents/160043/default/>