

NFER submission - Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) is the UK's largest independent provider of research into education. NFER's mission is to improve outcomes for future generations everywhere and to support positive change across education systems. We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, where we have focussed specifically on providing evidence that we have on clauses and amendments to the Bill.

Part 2

1.1 Clause 21 – Free breakfast club provision

The Government's stated ambition for the Bill is to remove barriers to opportunities in schools. This section sets out research on breakfast clubs as well as other key drivers for removing barriers to opportunity, namely the pupil premium and Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility.

Breakfast Clubs

In 2006, NFER undertook an evaluation into the Welsh Government's initiative into school breakfasts in Wales. Whilst this research is 18 years old, the findings remain relevant today and to Clause 21 of this Bill.

The research found qualitative evidence that the provision of breakfast in school had impacted on those pupils accessing the provision in the following ways:

- pupils being more settled in school
- increased social skills of pupils
- improved relationships between staff and pupils
- improved behaviour
- improved attendance and punctuality from some pupils
- improved concentration of some pupils
- an improved atmosphere in school.

The research identified a number of factors which contributed to effective delivery of the Welsh Government's school breakfast initiative. These were:

- the use of local authority (LA) catering staff already employed at the school
- positive attitudes towards the provision on the part of headteachers
- effective two-way communication between schools and LAs
- simple food choices
- the use of suppliers from whom LAs already procure food
- the use of supervisory staff already employed at the school

- the integration of the programme into wider LA initiatives, such as those aimed at promoting healthy eating habits
- LAs' contribution in providing effective support to schools.
- ensuring that the adults responsible for the provision were known to the children and understood the ethos of the school
- close monitoring of pupil attendance in order to identify whether those who would benefit the most took advantage of the opportunity
- providing pupils with opportunities to play after eating breakfast
- ensuring that issues concerning healthy lifestyles were discussed with pupils, including matters such as the dangers of obesity.

One drawback of the Welsh Government scheme was that schools found it difficult to measure the impact of the breakfast on pupils in a quantifiable way, due to the qualitative nature of much of the evidence. Eating breakfast in school generated a range of outcomes but it was sometimes difficult to separate the influence of breakfast from other factors. As part of this Bill, the Government should consider how the impact of breakfast clubs can be measured.

Pupil premium

Over the last decade, the value of funding targeted towards disadvantaged pupils has been eroded. This is partly due to pupil premium rates not being increased in line with inflation over time. While the recovery premium during the 2021/22, 22/23 and 23/24 academic years had temporarily restored some of the decline in funding for disadvantage, it was only a temporary measure and was specifically designed to help children recover from the additional negative consequences of the pandemic, rather than address underlying gaps in attainment. Relying on temporary funding streams and one-off commitments also creates uncertainty for schools when budgeting for the future at a time where they are already facing significant financial pressures from falling pupil numbers, the costs of Covid-19 and cost-of-living impacts.

NFER analysis shows that, since the 2014/15 academic year for pupils who are eligible for free school meals, or have been eligible in the past 6 years, the value of the pupil premium is £252 lower for each primary-aged pupil per year and £196 lower for each secondary-aged pupil per year than it would be had it been uprated in line with inflation. Failure to provide funding in line with or in excess of inflation may result in a widening of the disadvantage attainment gap, and will therefore not contribute to removing barriers for opportunities in schools.

FSM eligibility

Since April 2018, all pupils whose families are in receipt of Universal Credit (UC) and have annual net earnings of £7,400 or less are eligible to claim Free School Meals (FSM). This is alongside pupils who met the eligibility requirements for FSM as part of a number of legacy schemes. A key limitation of FSM eligibility is that it is a relatively blunt instrument to identify

pupil need. Currently, it is only families who are in receipt of UC and have annual net earnings of up to £7,400 who are eligible to claim for FSM, while pupils in families earning just over this threshold would not be eligible for any support.

This threshold has not been increased for over six years despite inflation and growth in employees' average regular earnings. This means that there are an increasing number of families on relatively low incomes just above the threshold who are not getting the help or support with FSM that they need.

1.2 Clause 40 – School teachers' qualifications and induction

Teaching by unqualified teachers is likely to have a detrimental impact on pupil attainment compared to the alternative of being taught by a qualified teacher. Therefore, tightening the expectation that employed teachers are qualified seems appropriate. The exemptions remain important so that schools – both maintained and academies – can benefit from teaching by specialist instructors.

The proportion of unqualified teachers is higher in schools with the most disadvantaged pupil intakes, which tend to struggle disproportionately with recruitment and retention challenges. The number of unqualified teachers also increased between 2022/23 and 2023/24 - a year in which the inflows from teacher training were significantly below target. Employing unqualified teachers may be a 'least worst' contingency that schools are using to mitigate the impact of teacher shortages, while ensuring pupils have a teacher deployed to their class. Therefore, schools – particularly those serving disadvantaged communities – need Government action to improve the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers to accompany the transition to a tighter expectation for employing qualified teachers. Otherwise, schools may be forced to take the 'next least worst' mitigation in the face of ongoing supply challenges.

Relatedly, the routes available for unqualified teachers who would make suitable teachers to gain QTS need to be clear, accessible and flexible enough that they are enabled to gain QTS rather than drop out of service.

1.3 Clause 45 – Extension of statutory pay and conditions arrangements

The level of teacher pay is one of many significant factors that have the potential to influence teacher recruitment and retention. Therefore, any action that reduces the pay of teachers is likely to contribute to worse retention and greater supply challenges. Given that some academies have chosen to pay some or all teachers more than the statutory limits placed by the STPCD, we welcome the Government's clarity on enabling academies to continue to do so if they choose, and to extend flexibilities to maintained schools.

1.4 Amendment: National Tutoring Guarantee

A National Tutoring Guarantee would imply large-scale access to tutoring for all disadvantaged children requiring academic support. The scale required would be similar to the National Tutoring Programme (NTP).

Should school leaders spend their pupil premium on tutoring? Is tutoring cost effective at improving attainment for disadvantaged pupils?

Before the NTP was conceived, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) included small group tutoring in its toolkit. The meta-analytical results of four months' progress in primary schools and two months' progress in secondary schools mask a couple of important details: most of the source research was conducted on reading and the security of the evidence was rated as 'moderate'. All the same, it is understandable that DfE backed tutoring as part of its £1bn package to avert missed learning which occurred during Covid-19 partial school closures. There are few interventions that are so targeted and acceptable to parents.

However, this evidence, collected from a series of small-scale studies undertaken in "ideal" research conditions, doesn't automatically apply to the effectiveness of a national programme involving a myriad of tutoring methods, academic subjects and year groups. This is why the EEF (in the first year) and DfE (in the second and third years) funded impact evaluations of the NTP. In its first year (which was heavily disrupted by further school closures), researchers struggled to find any impact in the main analyses. In its second year, researchers reported impacts of around one month, on average, for School-Led Tutoring and were not able to detect any impact of the Tuition Partners route (although it is possible that some of the multiple different Tuition Partners were achieving significant impacts). The third year evaluation also saw one-month improvements in English and maths at Key Stage 2 and very small improvements in both subjects at Key Stage 4. There was no impact evaluation in its fourth year.

The NTP was a mixture of 'pillars' such as Tuition Partners, School-Led Tutoring and Academic Mentors. Even within the Tuition Partners pillar, there were 33 different providers in the first year. This variety will inevitably result in variable quality across different year groups and subjects and goes some way to explain the much weaker effects of the NTP as a whole in comparison with studies that contributed to the EEF toolkit. It is also possible that methodological challenges with the NTP evaluation contributed to the weaker effects seen – our impact evaluation of the third year recognises that, due to limitations with the analysis, the true impact of the NTP is likely to be greater than these results suggest. However, a recent meta-analysis from the US indicates the impact of tutoring diminishes when implemented at scale.

Tutoring is not cheap and it is debatable whether it is cost-effective but some models use volunteers or undergraduates (for course credits) to cut down on costs. However, without detailed implementation evidence on how best to achieve 2-4 months' additional progress, is it appropriate to prioritise Pupil Premium spend on tutoring? There are now so many other potential draws on that funding - especially given the attendance and wellbeing crises. The

benefits of freeing up staff time to build relationships with their students which we know is core to improving pupil wellbeing and which could support improved attendance, may be considered a higher priority. If schools continue to spend their resources on tutoring – and if DfE choose to make more funding available in future – then it is essential that rigorous implementation research is carried out to ensure the funds are used most effectively.

All references available on request. Please contact Matt at m.bezzant@nfer.ac.uk for further information.