

Common evaluation, fewer schools to improve education

For Indian schools to reach developed country standards, emphasis must shift decisively to quality



BY INVITATION
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India has the world's largest school system: 14 lakh schools, 1 crore teachers and 25 crore students. Despite having roughly the same population and three times India's land area, China has just over 2,00,000 schools (excluding pre-schools). The difference is not just the number, but their size, resources they bring together, and, ultimately, what this means for learning.

India has largely achieved near-universal access to elementary schooling. But participation falls as they move through the system, particularly at the secondary level. The

28% (ASER). These gains show that progress is possible, but learning is slow-moving and will require sustained effort to scale up what is working. And as China shows, larger, integrated schools are also part of the answer.

Aim: Developed Country Levels

Vietnamese students scored 469 in maths, 462 in reading and 472 in science on PISA 2022, ranking between 31st and 34th among 81 participating countries across these three domains. OECD averages were 472, 476 and 485. Vietnam shows that per capita income alone does not determine learning outcomes.

For India, "developed-country level" to achieve high productivity should mean a workforce with strong foundational, cognitive and problem-solving skills, capable of sustaining upper-middle-income growth and competing in a technology-driven global economy.

Quantified benchmarks for India reaching 'developed' threshold by the late 2030s would be:

- Enabling school readiness for 80% of six-year-olds (ASER's 2019 Early Years found only 35% can do single-digit subtraction and 55% can complete simple early language tasks);
- Ensuring 80% children read with meaning by age 10 (ASER 2024 found 55% of class 5 govt-school children couldn't read a class 2-level text);
- Ensuring all schools, govt and private, publicly report class 5 learning outcomes against a common standard (no standardised key stage assessment exists today);
- Ensuring 60% of elementary students in govt schools study in learning-ready K-8 (KG to class 8) schools, with around 300 students per school (up from 28% today);
- Ensuring 80% of secondary students in govt schools study in learning-ready 6-12 or K-12 (KG to class 12) schools, with around 800 students per 6-12 and 1,300 per K-12 school (up from 56% today). Such large, integrated schools enable quality learning.

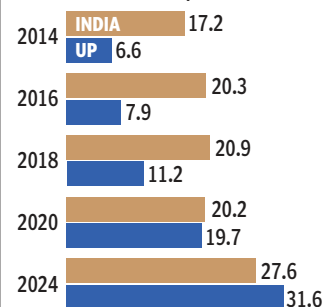


Illustration:
Uday Deb

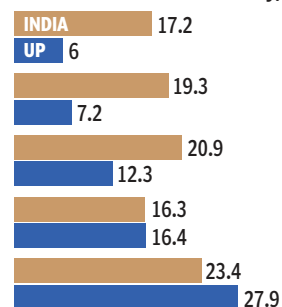
India's most populated state, UP, shows marked improvement

Govt schools - Rural India, Class 3

Can do subtraction, %



Can read a class 2-level story, %



What It Would Take

Extend hours of anganwadi workers.

Today, children receive less than an hour of structured pre-primary education in a typical anganwadi. Telangana shifted from a shorter anganwadi day to a seven-hour day, enabling anganwadi workers to spend around 2.5 hours on pre-school education. As anganwadis are increasingly co-located with schools, extending their hours can

strengthen the 3-6 age group's access to learning, care and childcare. Extending this model across all 14 lakh anganwadi centres, with additional incentives for anganwadi workers and helpers and an additional lunch meal for children, would require about Rs 7,000 crore annually, of which Rs 4,000 crore would be central share.

Institutionalise balvatikas. States should fully utilise existing balvatika (pre-primary) provisions

under NIPUN 2.0 to establish dedicated balvatika teachers, learning materials and mentoring support in at least the 2.5 lakh primary schools with enrolment above 75, at an estimated cost of Rs 1.5 lakh per school. This should be supplemented with a national school readiness assessment at the start of class 1 to track whether children are entering school ready to learn.

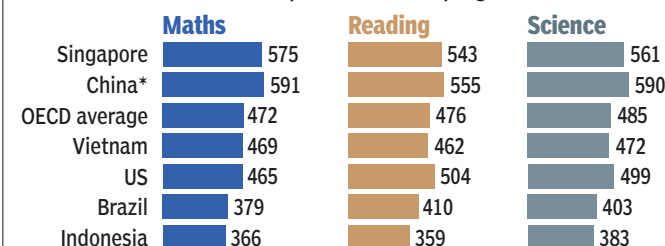
Extend NIPUN Bharat.

Launched in 2021, the mission put foundational literacy and numeracy at the centre of primary education for the first time, and states have built real delivery muscle behind it. That momentum should run for five more years, extending to classes 3-5 and pre-primary, with the annual allocation rising from Rs 4,737 crore to roughly Rs 5,700 crore, excluding pre-primary (covered through balvatika budget). Much of what is needed is already sanctioned under Samagra Shiksha but not fully drawn down; the opportunity is for more sharply defined guidelines. The new money is for the must-haves the extension makes necessary: a protected Rs 100-per-child learning recovery budget for classes 3-5, and a Rs 500 crore campaign to make NIPUN a public

China's class size is about 7 times that of India

Vietnam, a developing country, shows what is possible for India if we invest in edu reforms

PISA 2022 scores of developed and developing countries



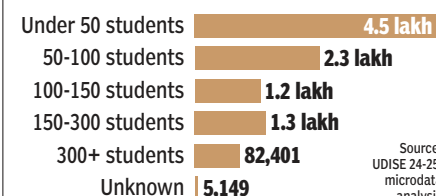
*China latest data is from 2018, 4 provinces

Two-thirds of all govt schools in India have <100 students

Small student count makes it difficult to provide dedicated teachers per classroom and facilities

Enrolment category

(Number of schools under each category)



Source:
UDISE 24-25,
microdata
analysis

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movement. Centre and states can continue to split this expenditure in a 60:40 ratio, as before.

Board exam reforms. India has over 60 recognised school boards, but there is no common standard for what board exams should measure or what a mark actually means. Most reward recall over competency. But there is welcome movement: CBSE has begun shifting towards competency-based assessments, with about half its questions in maths now testing higher-order thinking. Centre should help state boards make this shift, moving exams towards genuine understanding and real-world application.

Make learning visible.

Every school in India, govt and private, should have its class 5 children assessed against a common competency-based standard. At roughly Rs 212 crore for all children of class 5, this would provide a school-by-school picture of where children actually are. Sobral, in Ceará, Brazil, built its turnaround on exactly this — census assessment data that let every school write its own improvement plan, with Sobral rising from the bottom of Brazil's tables to the top. Schools should then disclose these results alongside other infrastructure and teacher resourcing.

The reforms above need to be delivered through schools designed to support learning. This calls for a larger structural reform: ensuring every child has access to a learning-

ready continuum school. China's large class 1-12 schools average around 2,800 students, roughly seven times the average size of India's class 1-12 schools. India's geography and settlement patterns call for a different scale. Our ambition should be a govt school network of around 1,75,000 learning-ready continuum schools by 2035 — 1,40,000 K-8 schools averaging 300 students and 35,000 K-12 schools averaging 1,300 students. At this scale, schools can provide one teacher per class, subject specialists at secondary level, sufficient enrolment for full teacher allocation, school leadership, functional libraries, ICT and subject labs, with transport where needed to protect access and equity. Most can be brownfield upgrades. The transition will require Rs 10-15 lakh crore over the next decade.

Rajasthan, MP, Telangana are already moving in this direction. The opportunity now is to take what is working to scale and make learning-ready schools the norm rather than the exception. It is also an agenda that should be owned collectively: govts, civil society, educators, parents and philanthropy all have a role in building public schools that families trust and that give every child a strong foundation for what comes next. This agenda needs to be pushed on a scale comparable to the Golden Quadrilateral, or India's drive for high-speed rail.

The writer is founder-CEO of The Convergence Foundation, and founder-chairperson of Central Square Foundation

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challenge now is to ensure children learn well and stay on track. NIPUN Bharat (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy), launched in 2021 following NEP 2020's focus on foundational literacy and numeracy, has brought greater focus to this challenge.

We Need To Be More Ambitious

Class 3 literacy in govt schools rose from 19% in 2016 to 23% in 2024, while numeracy rose from 20% to