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# India's School Education Crisis: From Public to Private

INDIAN EXPRESS

12 May 2026

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# India's School Education Crisis: From Public to Private

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## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"If RTE-funded private school seats are now the aspirational default, has India's public-schooling commitment quietly become a residual safety net?"*

## EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Indian Express argues that NITI Aayog analyses and UDISE+ 2024-25 data together map an unmistakable shift: Indian students are migrating from government to private schools even as overall enrolment declines and secondary dropout rises. This pattern signals an erosion of the public-schooling backbone that the Right to Education Act was meant to strengthen. The remedy, the editorial argues, is renewed investment in teacher quality and measurable learning outcomes, not surrender to a privatised default.

## WHAT THE LATEST DATA SHOW

The Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2024-25 – released this year – captures three concurrent trends:

- Total school enrolment across India has declined over the last three years, with the steepest fall in government schools.
- Private unaided school enrolment has held steady or grown in absolute terms, especially in urban and peri-urban geographies.
- Secondary-level (Class IX to XII) dropout remains stubborn, with the most acute losses among girls, SC and ST students and first-generation learners.

NITI Aayog's analysis of the data, released alongside the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024 findings from Pratham, highlights the same migration pattern and links it to perceived quality gaps in government schooling.

## THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION PROMISE

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 – in force since 2010 (operationalised April 1, 2010) – was the legal answer to Article 21A and the unfulfilled Directive Principle of Article 45. It mandated free, compulsory education for all children aged 6 to 14, prescribed pupil-teacher ratios, infrastructure norms and the 25% reservation in private unaided schools for economically weaker section (EWS) admissions reimbursed by the state.

Sixteen years on, the RTE has succeeded in near-universal enrolment at primary level but has not stopped the steady drift toward private schools. The 25% EWS quota, intended to mainstream poorer children into private classrooms, has had patchy uptake, contested reimbursements and inconsistent state delivery.

## WHAT IS DRIVING THE SHIFT

The migration is not driven by ideology; it is driven by perception of quality:

- **English-medium aspiration:** parents associate English-medium private schooling with employability, irrespective of measured learning outcomes.
- **Teacher absenteeism and vacancies:** state-government teacher vacancies remain in the hundreds of thousands; sanctioned teacher posts often go unfilled for years.
- **Learning poverty:** the World Bank's 2022 estimate placed India's learning poverty – inability to read and understand a simple text by age 10 – at over 70%, masking the headline enrolment success.
- **Infrastructure perception:** even where government schools have better physical infrastructure than nearby low-fee private schools, perception lags.

## NEP 2020 AND THE REPAIR STRATEGY

The National Education Policy 2020 reorganised school education into a 5+3+3+4 structure (Foundational, Preparatory, Middle, Secondary), set a Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) target by 2026-27 through NIPUN Bharat, and called for teacher reform through the National Professional Standards for Teachers. These are the right design moves, but the editorial argues that three execution failures threaten the policy:

- Teacher recruitment and continuous professional development remain under-resourced and bureaucratically captured.
- FLN measurement is happening but FLN remediation – targeted instruction in classrooms – is uneven.
- The 6% of GDP spending target on education, repeated in every policy document since the Kothari Commission (1964-66), remains unmet; the current spend hovers around 3% of GDP.

## A PUBLIC-SCHOOLING DEFENCE

The editorial argues that India cannot afford to abandon the public-schooling commitment. Three reasons stand out:

- Privatisation produces stratified outcomes; only the public school system can guarantee universal access in remote and tribal geographies.
- Public schooling is the political compact through which the Republic delivers on Article 21A.
- The fiscal arithmetic is unambiguous: subsidising EWS quotas in private schools at scale is more expensive than running quality public schools.

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#### Key arguments:

- UDISE+ 2024-25 and NITI Aayog analysis confirm steady migration from government to private schools, declining overall enrolment and stubborn secondary dropout.
- The RTE Act's enrolment success has not translated into a quality-led public-schooling system; the 25% EWS quota has not mainstreamed equity.
- NEP 2020's 5+3+3+4 design, NIPUN Bharat and FLN targets are sound; their execution gap – teacher reform, fiscal commitment, measurement-to-remediation translation – is the binding constraint.
- The 6% of GDP education spend remains unmet six decades after Kothari Commission first prescribed it.

#### Counterarguments:

- Private-school growth reflects parental choice and aspirations; restricting it would be paternalistic and impractical.
- Low-fee private schools in many states deliver better learning outcomes per rupee than equivalently funded government schools.
- Fiscal demands on the Union and states constrain the 6% of GDP target; absent reform of state finances, the target is symbolic.

**Keywords:** UDISE+ 2024-25, RTE Act 2009, Article 21A, Article 45, 25% EWS quota, NEP 2020, 5+3+3+4 structure, NIPUN Bharat, FLN 2026-27, ASER 2024, learning poverty (World Bank 2022), Kothari Commission, NITI Aayog school education report.

*The Indian Express's view is that India is approaching a fork. Either the next decade reinvests in a credible public-schooling system that earns parental trust on quality, or the country accepts a stratified two-track architecture in which public schools become the residual fallback for those who cannot afford the private alternative. The latter is constitutionally inadmissible and politically untenable. The former is achievable – but only if execution catches up with policy ambition.*

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