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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Full Classrooms, Empty Slates: The Gap Between Schooling and Learning

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THE LIFT LINE

Getting every child into a classroom was the achievement of one generation. Getting every child to actually read and reckon is the unfinished task of this one, and enrolment figures quietly conceal how far we still are from it.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This is a governance and social-development story dressed as an education story. India has all but solved the problem of **access**, with near-universal enrolment and vastly improved school infrastructure. Yet **learning outcomes lag**, with persistent deficits in **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)**. The distinction between schooling and learning is the analytical heart of the piece, and UPSC rewards candidates who can hold that distinction clearly.

There is a second thread with policy weight: the steady **shift of families from government to private schools**, which signals a crisis of trust in public provision even as public spending rises.

GS Paper 2: Issues relating to development and management of the social sector, especially education, and the role of government policies and interventions in that sector.

GS Paper 2: Government policies and interventions for development, and issues arising from their design and implementation.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the **NIPUN Bharat Mission (2021)** for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy operates under **Samagra Shiksha**. The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** set a target of **universal FLN by 2026-27**. Learning gaps are documented by **ASER (the Annual Status of Education Report)**, brought out by **Pratham**, and by the **Foundational Learning Study**. Related frames include the **Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009**, the **Performance Grading Index**, and the **Gross Enrolment Ratio**.

For **Mains**, argue that **access without learning is a hollow gain**, and that the priorities now are **foundational literacy and numeracy, teacher capacity, and assessment reform**, not further expansion of enrolment.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

For two decades, Indian education policy correctly prioritised getting children into school. The **RTE Act, 2009** entrenched the right, enrolment climbed toward universal, and the **Gross Enrolment Ratio** rose across levels. Buildings, toilets and mid-day meals followed.

But survey after survey of the **ASER** type has shown a stubborn truth: many children in a given grade cannot read a simple text or perform basic arithmetic expected several grades below. Schooling, in other words, has outrun learning. **NEP 2020** named this the country most urgent priority and set **NIPUN Bharat** in motion to secure **universal FLN by 2026-27**.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Enrolment is not the outcome that matters

Counting children in classrooms measures inputs, not results. The outcome that matters is whether a child in early primary can read with meaning and handle basic numbers. On that measure, ASER-type findings repeatedly show a large share of children falling short.

The drift to private schools is a signal

The movement of families from government to private schools is not merely a consumer preference. It is a vote of low confidence in public provision, and it risks hollowing out government schools while adding household cost for parents chasing perceived quality.

Where the effort must concentrate

LEVER	WHAT IT TARGETS	WHY IT IS DECISIVE
Foundational Literacy and Numeracy	Reading and basic maths in early grades	The base on which all later learning rests
Teacher capacity	Classroom instruction quality	Outcomes rise or fall with the teacher
Assessment reform	Measuring learning, not attendance	What gets measured gets managed
NIPUN Bharat under Samagra Shiksha	Mission mode for FLN	Aligns funds and effort to the goal

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

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Separate inputs, outputs and outcomes, and keep your eye on the last. Enrolment and infrastructure are inputs; attendance is an output; a child who can read and reckon is the outcome. India has excelled at inputs and outputs while under-delivering on the outcome, and the two are easily confused because the input numbers look impressive. The governance tension is between the visible and the vital: buildings and enrolment are visible and politically rewarding, while foundational learning is vital but slow and hard to display. Good policy resists the pull of the visible and invests in the vital.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Near-universal enrolment + better infrastructure (inputs) -> attendance (output) -> BUT weak foundational literacy and numeracy (outcome gap) -> NIPUN Bharat + teacher capacity + assessment reform -> children who can read and reckon (real outcome, NEP 2020 target 2026-27)

WAY FORWARD

- ① **Make FLN the single organising goal.** Align **Samagra Shiksha** funds, timetables and teacher effort behind **NIPUN Bharat**, so early-grade reading and arithmetic become the measured priority rather than an add-on.
- ② **Invest in teacher capacity.** Outcomes track instruction quality; strengthen pre-service and in-service training, and free teachers from non-teaching burdens so class time is real learning time.
- ③ **Reform assessment to measure learning.** Move official metrics beyond enrolment and attendance toward regular, low-stakes learning assessments of the **ASER** type, and use the **Performance Grading Index** to hold systems accountable for outcomes.
- ④ **Rebuild trust in government schools.** Improve visible learning results so families are not pushed toward costly private options, keeping public education both universal and credible.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly probed the gap between educational access and quality, the RTE Act, and human-capital formation. This editorial sharpens that line into the FLN debate, which sits at the centre of NEP 2020 and current policy.

Practice question: “In Indian school education, access has outrun learning.” Critically examine, and suggest measures to close the foundational literacy and numeracy gap. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: *Business Standard* (<https://www.business-standard.com>), *Ministry of Education, Government of India* (<https://www.education.gov.in>) Ujjyari Current Affairs · ujjyari.com · Free Daily Current Affairs for UPSC & State PCS

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