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Renewing School Education Means Fixing Learning, Not Just Structures

 **THE HINDU**

18 July 2026 ·

SOCIAL ISSUES ·**GS2**

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GS2

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THE LIFT LINE

We keep redrawing the organisation chart of Indian education and calling it reform. But a child who cannot read a Class 2 text in Class 5 does not need a new board or a renamed syllabus. She needs a teacher in the room and an assessment that measures whether she can think, not whether she can recall.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Education is the workhorse of the social-sector portion of GS2, and the examiner has grown wary of candidates who recite policy names without engaging the delivery gap. The mature argument is that India has largely solved **access** and now faces a **learning** crisis, and that the fix lies in pedagogy, teachers and assessment rather than in administrative or political reshuffles. A script that separates structural tinkering from genuine outcome reform earns its marks.

GS Paper 2: issues relating to the development and management of the social sector, government policies for education, and the mechanisms and institutions that deliver learning outcomes. For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** is the guiding framework; the **National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023** operationalises it; **NIPUN Bharat** drives **foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN)**; **PARAKH**, the national assessment centre established under **NCERT**, sets assessment standards; the **Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)** by the NGO **Pratham** is the leading field survey of learning levels; the **Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009** guarantees free and compulsory schooling for ages 6 to 14; and the **Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)** measures participation. For **Mains**, argue that the shift from **rote learning to competency-based education** is the real reform, and that it stands or falls on teacher capacity and assessment design.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

India's enrolment story is a genuine success. Near-universal primary enrolment and rising GER at the elementary level mean the classic problem of getting children into school is largely behind us. The problem that replaced it is starker: children are in school but not learning at grade level. Successive **ASER** surveys have

shown that a large share of rural Class 5 students cannot read a Class 2 text or perform simple division. Access without learning is a hollow victory, and it is the reason **NEP 2020** placed **foundational literacy and numeracy** at the top of the agenda through **NIPUN Bharat**.

The temptation of policymakers is to respond with structural change, because it is visible and fast: new boards, renamed examinations, altered class configurations, revised syllabi. These reshuffles photograph well but rarely touch the three variables that actually determine whether a child learns. Those variables are the presence and quality of the teacher, the design of the assessment, and whether the classroom itself is trusted to teach or has been outsourced to the coaching market.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

From rote to competency, but only on paper so far

NEP 2020 and NCF 2023 commit India to **competency-based education**, where a student is assessed on understanding and application rather than memorisation. **PARAKH** was created under NCERT precisely to align board examinations and large-scale assessments to this standard. Yet the classroom reality lags the policy text: examinations still reward recall, and teachers trained in rote methods cannot deliver competency-based learning by decree. Reform written into a framework is not reform delivered to a child.

The teacher vacancy is the quiet emergency

No pedagogy survives an empty chair. Chronic **teacher vacancies**, single-teacher schools and heavy non-teaching duties silently cap every other reform. A competency framework assumes a trained adult who can facilitate reasoning; where that adult is missing or overstretched, the framework is inert. Filling and training the teaching cadre is the least glamorous and most decisive intervention.

Coaching culture is a symptom, not a villain

The explosive growth of the **coaching** industry is evidence that parents no longer trust the school to prepare their children. It hollows out the classroom, entrenches inequality between those who can pay and those who cannot, and reduces education to test-cracking. The answer is not to demonise coaching but to make the school good enough that dependence on it falls.

REFORM TYPE	EXAMPLE	WHAT IT CHANGES	WHY IT FALLS SHORT ALONE
Structural / administrative	New board, renamed exam	Visible, fast, symbolic	Does not touch learning
Assessment	PARAKH, competency papers	How learning is measured	Fails if teaching stays rote
Teacher capacity	Fill vacancies, training	Presence and quality in class	Slow, resource-heavy
Curricular	NCF 2023, NIPUN Bharat	What and how children learn	Needs teachers to deliver

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Distinguish **inputs** from **outcomes**. Buildings, enrolment, syllabi and board structures are inputs; reading fluency, numeracy and the ability to reason are outcomes. India has spent a generation improving inputs and assuming outcomes would follow. The discipline of competency-based education is that it forces the system to measure and be judged on outcomes. A reform that improves inputs while leaving learning levels flat is motion mistaken for progress.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Near-universal enrolment achieved -> but ASER shows low learning levels -> structural reshuffles change inputs, not outcomes -> real levers are teacher capacity + competency assessment (PARAKH) + FLN (NIPUN Bharat) -> if pulled -> learning rises and coaching dependence falls

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Make outcomes the metric.** Judge every reform by movement in reading and numeracy levels rather than by structural change, using PARAKH and independent surveys like ASER as the yardstick.
- 2 **Treat teacher vacancies as an emergency.** Fill sanctioned posts, cut non-teaching duties and invest heavily in in-service training so that the competency framework meets a capable adult in every classroom.
- 3 **Align assessment with learning.** Redesign board and school examinations under PARAKH to reward understanding and application, because assessment silently dictates how teachers teach.

- ④ **Strengthen the school to shrink coaching.** Rebuild parental trust in public and low-cost schooling through FLN under NIPUN Bharat, so that dependence on the coaching market falls of its own accord.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

The examiner has repeatedly asked candidates to assess NEP 2020, to weigh the gap between educational access and quality, and to discuss the RTE Act's promise against its delivery. The winning pattern is the access-versus-learning distinction and the insistence that outcomes, not inputs, define reform.

Practice question: “The renewal of Indian school education lies not in structural reform but in learning outcomes, teacher capacity and assessment design.” Critically examine in the light of NEP 2020 and the competency-based approach. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: The Hindu, Ministry of Education / NEP 2020, ASER Centre, Pratham

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