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Centralised Education Policy Cannot Deliver True Reforms

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POLITY**GS2**

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GS2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Education sits in the Concurrent List, so the Centre has undisputed constitutional authority to legislate on it. If centralisation is constitutionally valid, on what ground can a state legitimately object to a uniform national policy like NEET, and where is the line between permissible national standard-setting and impermissible erosion of a state's policy space?"

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A single national exam gives every state the same standard. It also gives every state the same single point of failure.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Answers on education [federalism](#) routinely cite the 42nd Amendment moving education to the Concurrent List and stop there, as if that settled the debate. This editorial supplies the harder analytical point a strong answer needs: constitutionally permitted central authority over a Concurrent List subject is not the same question as how much uniformity that shared authority should actually impose, and the 2026 NEET-UG crisis shows what is at stake when a single national instrument concentrates both admissions and systemic risk.

GS Paper 2: Indian Constitution, historical underpinnings, evolution, features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure; federal structure, [devolution](#) of powers and finances up to local levels and challenges therein; government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Concurrent List, Entry 25	Education (subject to certain other entries), on which both Parliament and state legislatures can legislate	The constitutional basis of the entire centralisation debate
42nd Constitutional Amendment, 1976	Moved education (and four other subjects) from the State List to the Concurrent List	The precise amendment to name; commonly asked as a standalone Prelims fact
Article 254	Resolves a Centre-state legislative conflict on a Concurrent List subject in the Centre's favour	Explains why Parliament's education law prevails over a conflicting state law
NEET	The single mandatory national entrance test for MBBS/BDS admission across India, government and private colleges	Made mandatory by the Supreme Court's April 2016 ruling; the editorial's central example
National Curriculum Framework (NCF) / PARAKH	NEP 2020 instruments for standardised curricula and national learning assessment, run through NCERT	The non-NEET centralisation instruments the editorial also names

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Education began as a State List subject under the original Constitution. The **42nd Constitutional Amendment, 1976** moved it to the **Concurrent List (Entry 25, List III)**, along with four other subjects (forests, weights and measures, protection of wild animals and birds, and administration of justice), giving Parliament and state legislatures concurrent legislative competence, with **Article 254** resolving any conflict in Parliament's favour.

NEET's history runs through repeated litigation. Proposed as a single, uniform medical admission standard, an early version was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2013 on procedural grounds, restoring state-level exams temporarily; the **Supreme Court's April 2016 ruling reinstated NEET and made it the sole, mandatory entrance route** for MBBS and BDS admission nationwide, in both government and private colleges, ending states' ability to run separate medical entrance examinations.

Tamil Nadu has opposed NEET consistently and institutionally, not only rhetorically. Its Legislative Assembly repeatedly passed a bill seeking exemption from NEET in favour of admission based on Class 12 marks. **President Droupadi Murmu withheld assent** to that bill; Tamil Nadu, under Chief Minister **M K Stalin**, called this a "dark chapter in federalism" and **filed a Supreme Court petition in November 2025** challenging the withholding of assent.

The NEET-UG 2026 examination, held on 3 May 2026, was hit by allegations of paper leaks and procedural irregularities. Sustained nationwide protests followed, and **Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigned on 25 July 2026**, stating he accepted moral responsibility for the concerns raised.

THE ANALYSIS

- 1. The constitutional authority is not in dispute; its scope of use is.** Education's Concurrent List placement since 1976 gives Parliament clear power to legislate nationally, including on entrance examinations. The editorial's argument is not that this power is unconstitutional, but that using it to eliminate state-level alternatives entirely, rather than to set a shared floor, goes further than a genuinely concurrent, shared subject implies.
- 2. NEET converts a policy choice into a single national chokepoint.** By making one examination the sole gateway to medical education nationwide, the system concentrates not only admissions decisions but also operational risk, security of the paper, fairness of conduct, in one event. The **NEET-UG 2026 controversy and Minister Pradhan's resignation** are direct evidence of that concentrated risk materialising, not a one-off failure unrelated to the design.
- 3. Tamil Nadu's objection followed the constitutional process, which strengthens rather than weakens it.** The state legislated through its Assembly, sought the President's assent through the constitutional route, and, when that assent was withheld, approached the Supreme Court rather than acting unilaterally. Treating this as illegitimate obstruction misreads a state using every institutional channel available to it under the Constitution.
- 4. The counter-argument about uneven rigour is genuine and must be engaged, not dismissed.** Without some national floor, states could plausibly run entrance examinations of very different standards, creating uneven quality among admitted medical students across India. NEET was designed specifically to prevent that outcome, and the 2026 crisis being a failure of execution in a given year does not, by itself, prove the underlying design logic is wrong.
- 5. NEP 2020's curricular instruments extend the same pattern beyond entrance exams.** The **National Curriculum Framework** and the **PARAKH** assessment body at NCERT push toward standardised curricula and learning assessment nationally, meaning the centralisation the editorial critiques is not limited to admissions but extends to what is taught and how learning itself is measured, reinforcing the piece's broader claim about a national template crowding out state-level variation.
- 6. Conditional central funding adds a second layer of pressure states cannot easily resist.** Even where states retain formal legislative competence, funding tied to adopting central frameworks narrows their practical room to diverge, since declining conditions carries a real fiscal cost, a mechanism separate from and additional to direct legislation.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Education moved from State List to Concurrent List by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment, 1976 (Entry 25, List III)

Centre-state legislative conflict on Concurrent List subjects resolved by Article 254

NEET made the sole, mandatory MBBS/BDS entrance route nationwide by the Supreme Court's April 2016 ruling

Tamil Nadu's NEET exemption bill: President Droupadi Murmu withheld assent; state's Supreme Court petition filed November 2025

NEET-UG 2026 examination held: 3 May 2026; alleged paper leak and irregularities followed

Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigned 25 July 2026, citing moral responsibility

NEP 2020 curricular/assessment instruments: National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and PARAKH, both administered through NCERT

WATCH THE TRAP: DO NOT WRITE THAT EDUCATION "IS A STATE SUBJECT" IN THE PRESENT TENSE; SINCE 1976 IT HAS BEEN A CONCURRENT LIST SUBJECT, AND CONFLATING THE TWO MISSTATES THE EXACT CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS FOR THE CENTRE'S AUTHORITY TO LEGISLATE ON NEET AND THE NEP.

THE DEBATE

Argument FOR decentralised, state-led education reform. Constitutionally permitted central authority is not the same as constitutionally required uniformity. A single national examination and a single national curricular template concentrate both decision-making and systemic risk, as the 2026 NEET-UG crisis demonstrated concretely, while denying states like Tamil Nadu the ability to adapt admission criteria to their own social and educational realities, a choice they have pursued consistently through legitimate constitutional channels.

Argument AGAINST prioritising decentralisation over national standards. Without a shared national floor, states could run examinations of significantly uneven rigour, producing inconsistent quality among admitted students across the country, precisely the coordination failure NEET was designed to prevent. Education's Concurrent List placement itself reflects a deliberate national judgment, made in 1976, that some uniformity serves the country's collective interest, not merely central convenience.

Balanced verdict. The 2026 crisis is best read as an argument for redesigning the balance, not abandoning either principle. A genuine national floor, common minimum standards and robust safeguards against malpractice, addresses the coordination problem a purely decentralised system cannot solve, while real state-level flexibility within that floor, on the specific admission weightage or implementation detail, answers the legitimate federalism objection without discarding uniformity where it demonstrably serves students.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable pattern: **when a subject sits on the Concurrent List, ask two separate questions: does the Centre have the constitutional authority to act, and separately, how much of the available uniformity should it actually impose, since the first question being settled does not answer the second.**

Concurrent List subjects are deliberately shared, not exclusively central, precisely so that some matters carry a shared national interest alongside legitimate local variation. The common analytical error is treating the Centre's undisputed legislative competence as though it also settles the policy question of how uniform the resulting regime should be, when a shared list was, by constitutional design, meant to leave room for both levels of government.

This same structure recurs in criminal procedure reform, where Parliament's competence to legislate uniformly under the Concurrent List does not by itself resolve how much room states should retain in police administration and prosecution; in forest and environmental regulation, where central forest law coexists uneasily with state-level land-use and tribal-rights considerations; and in the administration of justice, another subject moved to the Concurrent List by the same 1976 amendment, where national judicial standards and state-level infrastructure and staffing realities frequently pull in different directions.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

EDUCATION: FROM STATE LIST TO CONTESTED CONCURRENT LIST

Pre-1976: Education = STATE LIST subject

42nd Amendment, 1976

Education = CONCURRENT LIST, Entry 25

(Parliament AND states can legislate; Art. 254 favours Parliament on conflict)

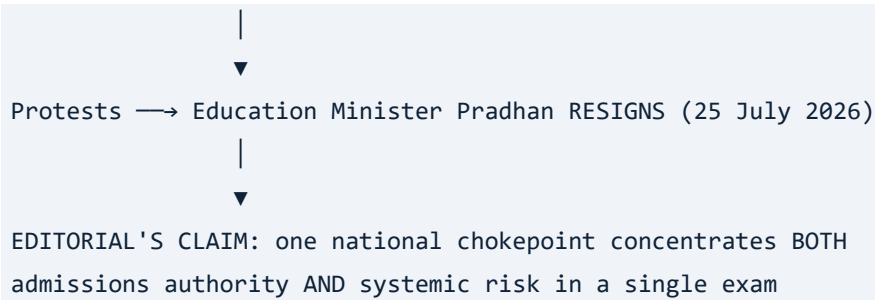
CENTRAL INSTRUMENTS

- NEET (sole entrance test, SC ruling, April 2016)
- NCF / PARAKH (NEP 2020, standard curriculum/assessment)
- conditional central funding

STATE RESPONSE

- Tamil Nadu: Assembly bill for NEET exemption
- President withholds assent
- TN files SC petition (Nov 2025)

NEET-UG 2026 (3 May 2026): paper leak allegations



TAKEAWAY BOX

The Constitution made education a shared subject. NEET and the NCF are testing whether “shared” still means what it says.

*Education moved to Concurrent List by **42nd Amendment, 1976 (Entry 25)**; Centre-state conflict resolved by **Article 254**; NEET made mandatory nationwide by **SC ruling, April 2016**; NEET-UG 2026 held **3 May 2026**; Education Minister **Dharmendra Pradhan resigned 25 July 2026**; NEP 2020 instruments **NCF** and **PARAKH**, both under **NCERT**.*

when a state has used every constitutional channel available to it, legislating, seeking presidential assent, and litigating, and still cannot secure an exemption it believes its students need, what obligation does the Union have to explain its reasoning rather than simply prevail by having the stronger constitutional hand?

UPSC has repeatedly tested Centre-state relations, the Concurrent List and federalism under GS2; this editorial updates the theme with a live, named 2026 episode, the NEET-UG paper leak and a Union minister’s resignation, giving the federalism debate a concrete institutional-accountability dimension beyond the usual abstract discussion.

“Placing a subject on the Concurrent List settles who may legislate on it, not how much uniformity that legislation should impose.” Discuss with reference to recent developments in India’s education policy.

Sources: *Hindustan Times, PIB*

Source: Centralised Education Policy Cannot Deliver True Reforms — Ujjyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

The editorial argues that instruments the Centre now uses to run education policy nationally, a single mandatory entrance test in NEET, model curricula under the National Curriculum Framework, and central funding tied to conditions, have cumulatively concentrated decision-making over what is taught and who gets admitted in New Delhi, eroding the policy space the Concurrent List placement of education was never meant to eliminate entirely, and that genuine reform requires states to be free to experiment rather than implement a single national template.

✓ SUPPORTING

- The constitutional starting point matters. Education was a State List subject until the 42nd Constitutional Amendment, 1976 moved it to the Concurrent List (Entry 25, List III), giving both Parliament and state legislatures the power to legislate on it, with Parliament's law prevailing in case of conflict under Article 254.
 This is the constitutional basis on which the Centre can act at all, and the editorial's objection is not that this authority is illegitimate but that its use has gone further than a shared subject should allow.
- NEET is the clearest example in the piece's frame. Proposed to create a uniform medical admission standard, the Supreme Court made NEET the sole, mandatory route to MBBS and BDS admission across India, in government and private colleges alike, in its April 2016 ruling, ending states' ability to conduct separate medical entrance examinations.
- Tamil Nadu's sustained institutional opposition illustrates the federalism cost directly. Its Legislative Assembly repeatedly passed a bill seeking exemption from NEET in favour of Class 12 marks based admission, and President Droupadi Murmu withheld assent to that bill, a decision the state challenged in the Supreme Court in a petition filed in November 2025, calling it, through Chief Minister M K Stalin, a "dark chapter in federalism."
- The events of 2026 sharpened the argument rather than settled it. Following alleged irregularities in the NEET-UG 2026 examination held on 3 May 2026, sustained protests led Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan to resign on 25 July 2026, citing moral responsibility for concerns over the exam's conduct, an outcome the editorial treats as evidence that a single national chokepoint concentrates not just admissions but systemic risk in one examination.

⚠ COUNTER

A national standard solves a real coordination problem that a purely state-led system cannot: without NEET, states could set entrance exams of widely varying rigour, letting some medical colleges admit less-prepared candidates and creating inconsistent quality across India's doctors, a risk that a single national benchmark, whatever its flaws in a single year's execution, is designed to prevent. The Concurrent List placement of education itself reflects a deliberate constitutional judgment, made in 1976 and never reversed, that national uniformity in at least some aspects of education serves the country's interest, not only the Centre's.

**WAY FORWARD**

Pursue calibrated decentralisation rather than a wholesale rejection of national standards: preserve a genuine national floor, such as a common minimum syllabus and safeguards against examination malpractice, since the NEET-UG 2026 crisis showed a national test is not automatically a more secure one, while giving states real flexibility in how they weight school-leaving performance, regional context and local admission criteria within that floor. Strengthen independent oversight of national examinations, since a minister's resignation is an accountability response after the fact, not a systemic fix, and treat state objections raised through the constitutional process, as Tamil Nadu did through its Assembly, as a legitimate signal to review implementation rather than as obstruction to be litigated away by default.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Education was moved from the State List to the Concurrent List by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment, 1976. Critically examine how this constitutional position has shaped Centre-state tensions over education policy, with reference to NEET and the National Education Policy, 2020. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Education is a Concurrent List subject, placed there by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment, 1976, meaning both Parliament and state legislatures may legislate on it, with Parliament's law prevailing in a conflict under Article 254. That constitutional design permits significant central involvement in education, but it does not by itself settle how much uniformity a shared subject should carry, which is the tension this editorial examines through the specific lens of NEET and the broader instruments of national curricular and funding policy.

BODY

NEET is the sharpest illustration. It became the sole, mandatory entrance route for MBBS and BDS admission nationwide following the Supreme Court's April 2016 ruling, ending states' ability to run their own medical entrance examinations.

Tamil Nadu has opposed this arrangement consistently, its Assembly repeatedly passing a bill to exempt the state in favour of Class 12 marks based admission; President Droupadi Murmu withheld assent to that bill, and Tamil Nadu challenged the decision in the Supreme Court in November 2025. The events of 2026 added a further dimension to the debate: alleged irregularities in the NEET-UG 2026 examination, held on 3 May 2026, triggered protests significant enough that Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigned on 25 July 2026, citing moral responsibility.

Beyond NEET, the National Education Policy, 2020 pushes further centralisation of form through the National Curriculum Framework and the PARAKH assessment body at NCERT, mandated to standardise learning assessment nationally. The counter-argument carries real weight: without a national benchmark, states could run entrance examinations of uneven rigour, and Entry 25's Concurrent List placement itself reflects a deliberate 1976 constitutional judgment that some national uniformity in education serves the country as a whole, not only the Centre.

CONCLUSION

The strongest position engages both halves rather than choosing one. Constitutionally permitted uniformity is not the same as constitutionally required uniformity; the Centre's authority to legislate does not by itself answer how much room states should retain to experiment within that authority.

The 2026 NEET-UG crisis showed that centralisation concentrates systemic risk, a single compromised exam, in one national chokepoint, exactly as Tamil Nadu's federalism objection anticipated, which is a strong reason to combine a genuine national floor with real state-level flexibility rather than treat the current arrangement as the only workable one.

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