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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Fixing the Foundations: India's School System Has a Capacity Crisis

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ESSAY

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Fixing the Foundations: India's School System Has a Capacity Crisis

 **Business Standard**

25 August 2026

GS2
ESSAY


INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India monitors school education largely through expenditure and enrolment. If you could replace those with two different indicators, which would you choose, and what behaviour would they change?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)

Business Standard

 **Every fact web-verified against primary sources**

THE LIFT LINE

A system optimises for what it is measured on. India has been measuring how much it spends and how many enrol, and has got exactly that.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Education is a standing GS2 topic and a frequent Essay theme. Aspirants generally know the schemes; what distinguishes a strong answer is the ability to name the specific institutional bottleneck and propose a measurable alternative.

GS Paper 2: Issues relating to development and management of social sectors involving education; government policies and interventions.

Essay: Education, human capital, and the gap between policy intent and outcome.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)	Total enrolment at a stage, regardless of age, as a percentage of the official age-group population	The indicator showing the higher-secondary drop
UDISE+	The Unified District Information System for Education Plus, the government's school data platform	The source of school infrastructure and enrolment data
Transition rate	The proportion of students moving from one stage of schooling to the next	The measure the editorial argues should be a headline indicator

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Constitutional and Statutory Frame

PROVISION	CONTENT
Article 21A	Right to free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14
86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002	Inserted Article 21A, along with Article 45 (early childhood care) and Article 51A(k) (parental duty)
RTE Act, 2009	Operationalised Article 21A; norms for pupil-teacher ratio, infrastructure and no-detention
Concurrent List, Entry 25	Education, moved from the State List by the 42nd Amendment Act, 1976

The RTE Act's pupil-teacher ratio norms are **30:1 at the primary stage** and **35:1 at the upper primary stage**.

The Institutions and Schemes

BODY OR SCHEME	ROLE
NCERT (established 1961)	Curriculum, textbooks, teacher education research
CBSE	Affiliation and assessment standards for affiliated schools
NCTE	Regulation of teacher education
Samagra Shiksha (2018)	Integrated scheme for school education, pre-school to Class 12
NIPUN Bharat (2021)	Foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3
PM SHRI (2022)	Upgrading selected schools as exemplars of NEP 2020
NEP 2020	Replaced the 10+2 structure with a 5+3+3+4 design

NEP 2020 set a target of achieving a **100 per cent Gross Enrolment Ratio in school education from pre-school to secondary level by 2030**, against which a sub-50 per cent higher-secondary GER in several regions is a substantial shortfall.

THE ANALYSIS

1. Vacancies at apex bodies are systemic, not local. A vacant teaching post affects one school. A **56 per cent vacancy at NCERT** affects curriculum design, textbook revision and teacher-education frameworks for the whole country, and a **44 per cent vacancy at CBSE** affects assessment standards across thousands of affiliated schools. The editorial's choice to lead with these figures rather than with school-level vacancies is analytically *deliberate*: it identifies the point where the deficiency multiplies.

2. The constraint has moved from access to transition. The RTE guarantee runs from age six to fourteen, roughly Class 1 to Class 8. Higher secondary sits outside the *justiciable* entitlement, and it is precisely there that gross enrolment falls below 50 per cent in several regions. The system has a legally enforced floor and no comparable support at the stage where students actually leave, which is the structural explanation for the pattern.

3. Connectivity is a precondition, not a feature. Digital initiatives, whether online content repositories, assessment platforms or remote teacher training, assume connectivity. With **58.6 per cent of government schools connected in 2024-25**, roughly two in five are excluded from every such initiative by default. Worse, because digital delivery is cheaper per student where it works, an unconnected school falls further behind with each new digital programme, so the gap widens rather than closes.

4. The counter-argument is the strongest part of this debate. ASER surveys have repeatedly shown that learning outcomes, particularly foundational reading and arithmetic, did not improve in proportion to rising enrolment, teacher numbers and expenditure. This is genuine evidence that inputs do not automatically

produce outcomes, and that teacher accountability, absenteeism, curriculum overload and the mismatch between grade-level instruction and actual student attainment operate independently of resourcing.

5. The monitoring argument reconciles the two positions. If inputs alone do not deliver outcomes, and the system is monitored on inputs, then the system will continue to deliver inputs. Changing the headline indicator from expenditure and enrolment to **learning, retention and transition** changes what administrators optimise for. This is the editorial's most transferable insight, and it survives the counter-argument rather than being defeated by it.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Vacancies cited: 56 per cent of sanctioned NCERT posts, 44 per cent of CBSE posts.

58.6 per cent of government schools had internet in 2024-25.

Higher-secondary GER below 50 per cent in several regions.

Article 21A inserted by the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002; RTE Act, 2009 covers ages 6 to 14.

RTE pupil-teacher ratio norms: 30:1 primary, 35:1 upper primary.

Education is in the Concurrent List, Entry 25, moved from the State List by the 42nd Amendment Act, 1976.

NCERT established 1961. Samagra Shiksha launched 2018; NIPUN Bharat 2021; PM SHRI 2022.

NEP 2020 replaced 10+2 with the 5+3+3+4 structure and targets 100 per cent GER up to secondary level by 2030.

ASER is published by the non-governmental organisation Pratham; UDISE+ is the government's own school data platform.

*Gross Enrolment Ratio counts enrolment regardless of age and can therefore exceed 100 per cent where there are over-age or under-age students. It is not the same as **Net Enrolment Ratio**, which counts only the official age group. Also distinguish **ASER** (non-governmental, household-based, tests actual reading and arithmetic) from **UDISE+** (government, school-reported administrative data).*

THE DEBATE

FOR (the capacity deficit is the binding constraint): Vacancies at NCERT and CBSE degrade the standards the entire system depends on. Higher-secondary transition is unprotected by any legal entitlement and enrolment reflects it. Two in five government schools cannot participate in any digital initiative. These are

concrete, measurable and fixable deficits.

AGAINST (inputs have never been the real problem): Enrolment, teacher numbers and expenditure have all risen for two decades while ASER data show foundational learning stagnating. Adding staff and bandwidth to a system with weak accountability and a curriculum pitched above actual student attainment will reproduce the same outcomes at higher cost.

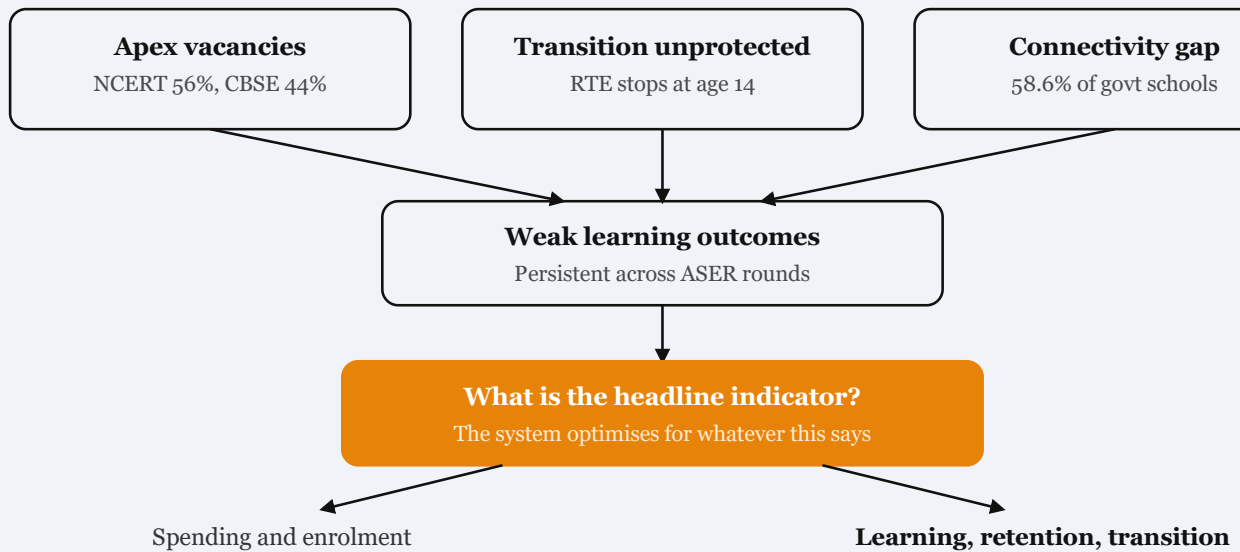
Balanced verdict: Both are right about different things, and the monitoring prescription is what connects them. Inputs are necessary but insufficient; accountability is essential but cannot function without minimum capacity. The decisive move is changing the indicator, because a system that is judged on learning, retention and transition will allocate its inputs toward those ends, whereas one judged on expenditure and enrolment will not, regardless of how much it is given.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

When a sector shows persistent underperformance despite rising resources, the diagnostic question is not “is the money enough” but “what is the system rewarded for reporting.”

Organisations optimise against their measured indicator with considerable ingenuity. Measure enrolment and you get enrolment, including of students who attend rarely. Measure expenditure and you get expenditure, including on things that do not teach. Measure learning, retention and transition and the same ingenuity is redirected at those. The instrument is not extra funding; it is the definition of success. This principle generalises to health, policing and every other outcome-oriented public service.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS



Three separate deficits converge on the same outcome, but the lever at the bottom is the one that determines whether fixing them is ever prioritised.

TAKEAWAY BOX

A system optimises for what it is measured on. India has been measuring how much it spends and how many enrol, and has got exactly that.

NCERT vacancy 56 per cent, CBSE 44 per cent; 58.6 per cent of government schools with internet in 2024-25; Article 21A via the 86th Amendment 2002; RTE Act 2009 covers ages 6-14; PTR norms 30:1 and 35:1; education in Concurrent List Entry 25 via the 42nd Amendment 1976; NCERT established 1961; NEP 2020's 5+3+3+4 structure and 100 per cent GER by 2030; ASER by Pratham; UDISE+.

Is it defensible for the right to education to end at age fourteen when the evidence shows students leave the system after it?

Connects to past UPSC Mains questions on the National Education Policy, on foundational literacy and numeracy, and on the gap between educational access and learning outcomes.

"India solved the problem of getting children into school and has not yet solved the problem of what happens to them there." Critically examine.

Source: Fixing the Foundations: India's School System Has a Capacity Crisis — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Business Standard argues that India's school education system faces a capacity crisis that runs deeper than classroom construction, evidenced by 56 per cent of sanctioned NCERT posts and 44 per cent of CBSE posts lying vacant, higher-secondary gross enrolment below 50 per cent in several regions, and only 58.6 per cent of government schools having internet in 2024-25, and that the remedy requires time-bound teacher recruitment, continuous training, expanded connectivity and monitoring that tracks learning, retention and transition rather than expenditure alone.



SUPPORTING

- Vacancies at the apex institutions are qualitatively different from vacancies in a school, because NCERT and CBSE set curriculum, assessment standards and teacher-training frameworks for the entire system, so a persistent shortfall there degrades the standards on which every school depends.
- A higher-secondary gross enrolment ratio below 50 per cent in several regions indicates that the binding constraint has moved from initial access, which the Right to Education framework largely addressed, to retention and transition between stages, which it does not cover.
- The finding that only 58.6 per cent of government schools had internet in 2024-25 undercuts the entire digital-delivery strategy, since online content, assessment platforms and teacher-training modules presuppose connectivity that two in five government schools do not have.



COUNTER

The counter-view is that filling sanctioned posts and laying connectivity are input measures that have historically failed to move learning outcomes, as successive ASER surveys have shown persistent gaps in foundational literacy and numeracy despite rising enrolment, teacher numbers and expenditure. On this reading the deeper problems are accountability, teacher absenteeism, curriculum overload and the mismatch between grade-level instruction and actual student levels, none of which additional inputs by themselves resolve.



WAY FORWARD

The editorial's prescription is a shift in what is measured: replace expenditure and enrolment as headline indicators with learning, retention and transition, tie teacher recruitment to time-bound targets with explicit incentives for difficult and remote postings, institutionalise continuous professional development rather than one-off training, and complete connectivity as a precondition rather than an add-on to digital initiatives.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

India's school education challenge has shifted from access to capacity and quality. Examine the institutional vacancies, transition gaps and infrastructure deficits that constrain outcomes, and suggest a monitoring framework that would address them. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

India's school education debate has largely been conducted in the vocabulary of access, and by that measure the Right to Education framework succeeded. Business Standard argues that the binding constraint has since moved to capacity and quality, and that the system's own institutional infrastructure is now the weak link.

BODY

Three data points anchor the argument. First, 56 per cent of sanctioned posts at the National Council of Educational Research and Training and 44 per cent at the Central Board of Secondary Education were vacant.

These are not ordinary staffing gaps: NCERT designs curriculum and textbooks and shapes teacher education, while CBSE sets assessment standards for thousands of affiliated schools, so a shortfall at these bodies propagates through the entire system rather than affecting a single institution. Second, gross enrolment at the higher-secondary stage remained below 50 per cent in several regions.

Because the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, enacted under Article 21A inserted by the Eighty-sixth Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002, guarantees education only from ages six to fourteen, the higher-secondary stage sits outside the justiciable entitlement, and transition across that boundary is where the system loses students, disproportionately girls and first-generation learners. Third, only 58.6 per cent of government schools had internet in 2024-25, which means that a digital-delivery strategy built on online content, assessment platforms and remote teacher training rests on connectivity that two in five government schools lack.

Against this, the counter-argument carries real weight. Successive Annual Status of Education Report surveys have documented that learning outcomes did not improve proportionately as enrolment, teacher numbers and expenditure rose, which indicates that inputs alone do not determine outcomes, and that accountability, teacher absenteeism and the gap between grade-level curriculum and actual student attainment matter independently.

CONCLUSION

A complete answer should hold both propositions together: inputs are necessary but not sufficient. The distinctive contribution of this editorial is its monitoring prescription, that learning, retention and transition should replace expenditure and enrolment as the headline indicators, because a system reports what it is measured on and therefore optimises for it.

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