

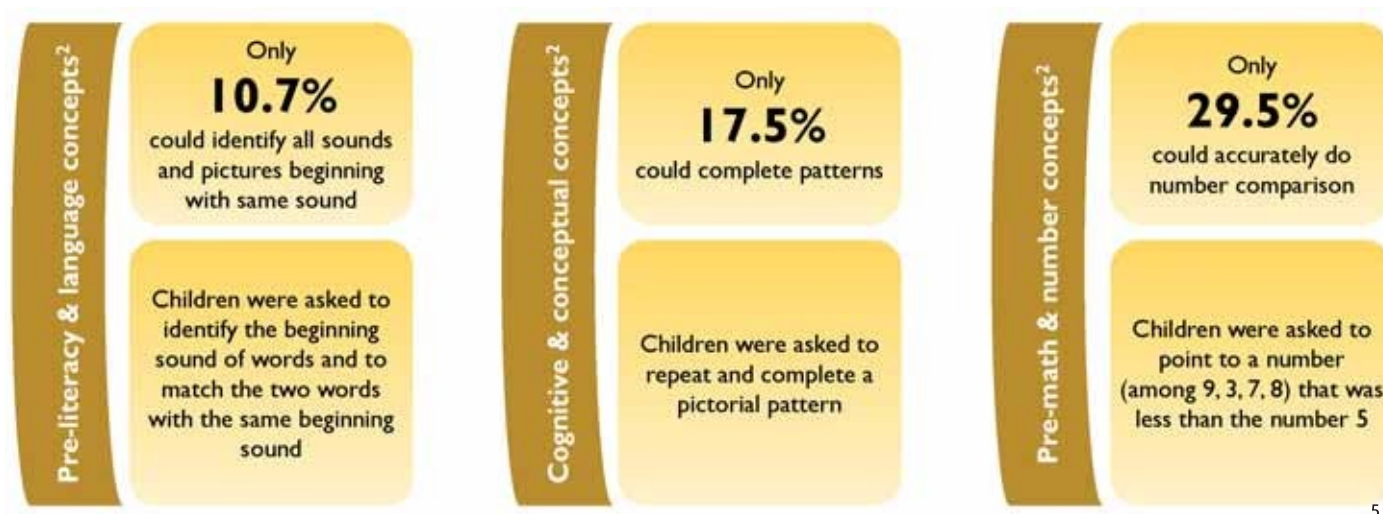
# Pre-primary schooling: An urgent priority for India

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## A crisis of school readiness

India's learning crisis is not news. The National Achievement Survey of 2017 tells us that 1 in 3 students in Grade 3 cannot read small text with comprehension and that 1 in 2 students in Grade 3 cannot use math to solve daily life problems. The findings from the 2018 ASER report are even more stark - only 50% of children in Grade 5 in rural India could read a Grade 2 level text, and only 28% of children in Grade 5 could solve a division problem.

But when exactly do these learning deficits begin? The ASER data from 2018 begins to reveal some answers. For instance, 42.7% of rural Indian children in Grade 1 could not even recognize the letters of the alphabet in their medium of instruction, and 35.7% could not recognize numbers from 1-9. Data from the 2017 India Early Childhood Education Impact study by Ambedkar University and ASER Centre tell us that the origins of this crisis lie even before children enter Grade 1. Only 1 in 10 children aged 5 could match two pictures beginning with the same letter, and only 1 in 6 could complete a simple pictorial pattern. Data from FSG's PIPE program<sup>3</sup> (pre-schoolers in urban India) and from state government-led school readiness programs (children at the start of Grade 1 in Karnataka and Gujarat)<sup>4</sup> confirm the same hypothesis. Children in India were simply not school-ready! The IECEI study also goes on to confirm something in the Indian context that research from around the world has been telling us for almost half a century - that a well-designed and well-delivered pre-primary program is the most effective way to bridge the learning gap early and set the children up for success in later years.



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However, the public system in India has been unable to provide quality Early Childhood Education to our children aged 3-6, and even more specifically to our children aged 5-6. Pre-schooling is but one of six services delivered through the Anganwadi network, and is arguably the least prioritised. Further, to make things more difficult, an anganwadi worker is tasked with responsibilities such as vaccinations, maternal health and malnutrition making it difficult to ensure sufficient instructional time. Consequently, only slightly more than a quarter of children in the 5-6 age cohort were in anganwadis in rural India<sup>6</sup>. So, where are the rest of the children? A weak Anganwadi network is causing children to either attend private kindergartens and nursery schools (unregulated and emphasizing almost completely on rote learning), or enter school directly in Grade 1, unready and unprepared to face the rigours of formal schooling. Naturally, this lack of a developmentally appropriate pre-primary education leads to poor school readiness, which gradually balloons into a learning crisis at a national level.

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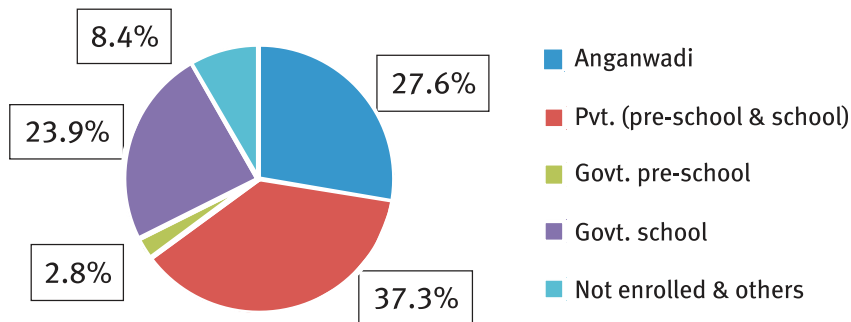
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fsg.org/pipe>

<sup>4</sup> <http://centralsquarefoundation.org/articles/school-readiness-programs-karnataka-gujarat.html>

<sup>5</sup> Results from India Early Childhood Education Impact Study conducted across 3 states (Telangana, Assam, Rajasthan) by Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development and ASER Centre - <http://ceced.net/iecei/>

<sup>6</sup> Annual Status of Education Report (2018) - <http://www.asercentre.org/Keywords/p/337.html>

**Distribution of 5 year olds across different models<sup>7</sup>**



### **Pre-primary sections (PPS) in primary schools: India's best bet for quality at scale**

The recently released draft NEP, to its credit, calls out early childhood care and education as a clear priority area and goes on to call it 'perhaps the greatest and most powerful equaliser'. However, while it calls for universalizing 3 years of pre-primary schooling, it suggests no clear pathway to the central or state governments to implement the recommendations. In fact, of the four modalities suggested in the document, three involve strengthening the size and quality of the Anganwadi network. Any effort to bolster the Anganwadi network could turn out to be sub-optimal, considering that a vast majority of parents, especially of the older children, seem to have already abandoned the system in favour of schools or private pre-schools.

While we need to work on enhancing the pre-school component of the ICDS, we need to be cognizant that the beneficiaries would most likely be younger children, mostly 3 year olds, and some 4 year olds. The cohort of students who will enter Grade 1 the next year, most likely in the 5-6 age group, would be best served by a year of quality pre-schooling delivered through the public education system. Indeed, one of India's pressing reform priorities would be to ensure provision of at least one year of developmentally appropriate pre-primary schooling (PPS) delivered through the primary school. Many countries globally with comparable GDP per capita, including China and Bangladesh, have made this a top reform agenda in recent years.

A well-designed PPS class with a dedicated teacher could ensure that all children will enter Grade 1 school ready. The teacher, with 3-4 hours of instructional time per day, would be able to work on multiple aspects of school readiness with this cohort- the ability to pay attention in the classroom, follow instructions, interact with peers, identify shapes and colours, recognize patterns, correlate alphabets to their sounds, count numbers, and even learn how to hold a book. And as data from the IECEI shows, acquisition of these critical skills between the age of 5 and 6 years correlates very strongly with the ability to read with comprehension and do basic math by age 8 or 9.

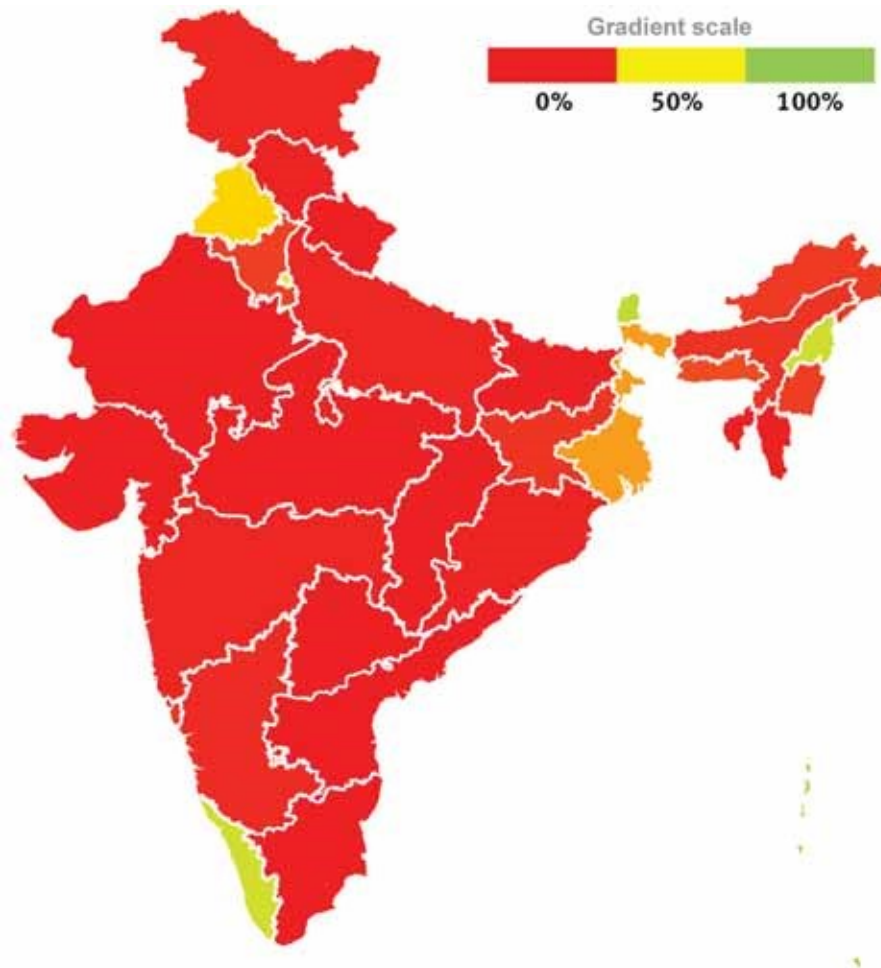
An additional aspect in which state governments might benefit by implementing PPS is enrolment. A lot of children who enter private schools at age 4 or 5 due to a lack of public provision will be able to enter government schools. If implemented in a phased and strategic manner, PPS could well arrest or maybe even reverse the trend of declining enrolment in public schools.

### **An implementation blueprint for states**

There have been some government efforts across the country to introduce PPS in primary schools, but these have been mostly in municipal corporations (Pune, Chennai, Mumbai) or small states (Delhi, Sikkim). Some large states like Assam, Haryana, West Bengal and most recently Punjab have provided for one year of PPS, but multiple questions loom around quality and modality of implementation. Civil society organizations working in these geographies report that the provision in most cases lacks a structured curriculum, a dedicated teacher, adequate instructional time, or in most cases, all of the above.

<sup>7</sup> Annual Status of Education Report (2018) - <http://www.asercentre.org/Keywords/p/337.html>

## Provision of Pre-Primary Sections in Primary Schools across States<sup>8</sup>



The role of the state education departments becomes integral in ensuring that quality ECE is provided to all children at scale. This can be broken down into four pillars.

### 1. *Build technical competence*

In India, there is broad consensus around what constitutes quality ECE and what competencies need to be developed in a child to be school-ready and the school to be child-ready! The National ECCE Policy (2013) lays out the curricular principles very clearly, and the NCERT also released a preschool curriculum and guidelines for implementation in August 2019. States would need support in contextualizing these guidelines for their local context and designing an optimum model that encompasses classroom material, teacher training, monitoring framework and assessments. And to plug this gap, there already exists a robust ecosystem of sector experts and civil society organizations with deep understanding of local contexts and of early childhood pedagogy from across the country. For instance, Pratham in Punjab & Himachal Pradesh, Vikramshila in Kolkata, Akshara Foundation in Bengaluru, CLR in Pune etc. State governments should proactively seek to partner with these organizations to upskill themselves on all dimensions of quality ECE.

<sup>8</sup> DISE 2017-2018 | % of primary schools with PPS (teacher > 0 and enrolment > 0)

## 2. Identify staffing models

The presence of a dedicated teacher (and therefore adequate instructional time) is one of the important prerequisites to deliver a quality pre-primary program. Hence, the need of the hour is for State Governments to gradually hire new teachers for the pre-primary program and eventually create a separate cadre of teachers that are specialized in delivering pre-primary instruction.

In the interim, in order to minimize hiring, State governments can experiment with a combination of models to provide the extra resource. For instance, in districts where there are aggregate excess teachers, they could be redeployed to pre-primary classrooms. Another option would be to hire contractual teachers for a specific tenure (for eg. Telangana). Alternatively, underutilized cadres [for eg. Shiksha Mitra (UP), Panchayat Education Assistants (Sikkim)] could be leveraged to staff pre-primary classroom. And in some cases, the School Management Committees could also be empowered and encouraged to appoint teachers from school-level funds (for eg. Karnataka and Kerala).

## 3. Leverage central government funding for pilots

Funds allotted under the Annual Work Plan and Budget (AWP&B) are a great opportunity for states to set up meaningful pilots around different pre-primary models. For the past couple of years, state governments have been getting increased allotment under the SSA for pre-primary education. For instance, there were three states which were allotted more than Rs. 45 crores (including a high per school allotment) in 2019-20 (Punjab, HP and MP). This quantum of financial assistance from the centre with a high per-school allotment can boost provision of quality pre-primary education. While some states have been able to set up interesting PPS pilots using these funds, most others continue to use them for infrastructure or input upgrades for anganwadis. State governments should look to leverage these funds in a strategic manner and unlock higher funding in successive years.

State	PAB funding 18-19 (INR cr.)	PAB funding 19-20 (INR cr.)
Punjab	28.0	105.9
Himachal Pradesh	3.0	59.2
Madhya Pradesh	0.1	45.0
Andhra Pradesh	5.5	26.1
Kerala	10.0	20.1

## 4. Create a pathway to scale

Universalizing PPS in any one state in one go, while a positive political move, would be extremely difficult given current funding constraints and would inevitably also lead to dilution of quality. States should begin introducing PPS in larger schools in the first few years so as to ensure sufficient enrolment to warrant appointing a dedicated teacher. States could create a phased implementation plan eventually covering a significant percentage of 5-6 year old children through a much smaller percentage of schools. For instance, 47% of all students in Grade 1 in government schools in Gujarat are enrolled in only 6600 schools (19% of the total primary schools in the state). These 6600 schools would be an obvious choice to implement PPS in, in the first phase.

Conditions are ripe in India for multiple states to consider introducing a high-quality pre-primary program: a strong policy thrust from the NEP, availability of funds from the centre, and renewed hope and interest among civil society organizations. A strategic and phased approach to introduce one year of pre-primary classes through all primary schools in India would go a long way in effectively tackling our foundational learning crisis. 58% of the children in government schools in the country are currently enrolled across ~2.3 lakh high-enrolment schools<sup>9</sup>. A realistic yet ambitious 5-year target for India could be to provide a high-quality pre-primary section in each one of these 2.3 lakh primary schools to begin with.

<sup>9</sup> DISE 17-18 | Grade 1 enrolment greater than 20