



Next steps in West Bengal: How ASER West Bengal 2021 data can help us to plan ahead

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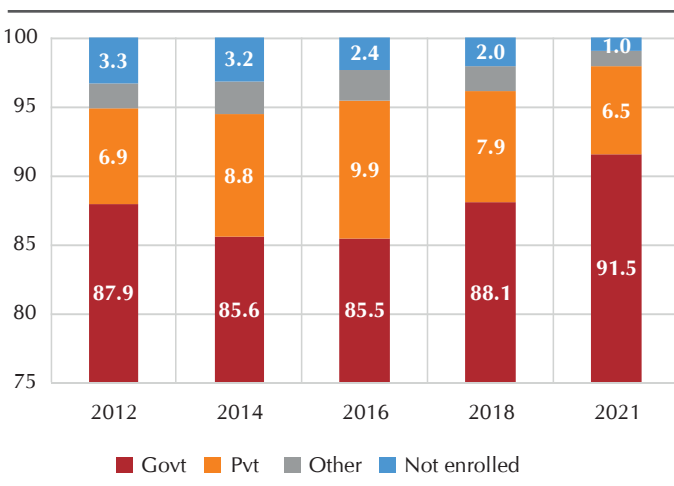
For more than 15 years now, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) has been an annual feature of the education landscape in India. It is the only annual source of data for basic learning outcomes using a nationally representative sample of children across rural India. The usual ASER is a field-based household survey conducted in each rural district in the country. Apart from collecting information about student enrollment and type of school, children are given a few simple reading and arithmetic tasks that they do individually and orally. In a typical year, the ASER report is released in mid-January. The timing is such that estimates for schooling and learning for the current school year should be available, not only before the school year ends but also before budgets and plans are made for the next year.

Like almost all other regular activities in education, the pandemic disrupted the ASER cycle as well. The usual field ASER survey could not be conducted in 2020. However, in 2021, between the different COVID waves, ASER assessments were carried out in the field in three states – Karnataka (in February-March 2021), Chhattisgarh (October-November 2021) and West Bengal (December 2021). Thus, the ASER 2021 report from West Bengal is the most recent estimate of schooling and learning available in India right now that can be compared to similarly collected data from past years.

Given the long period of school closure, widespread incidence of infection and ill health, economic difficulties and disruptions experienced by families and communities, there has been deep concern about many aspects of education. Two major and deep worries have been around children not returning to school and potential learning loss.

For West Bengal, as far as children's school enrollment is concerned, there are some expected and some unexpected findings. West Bengal has always been a state with very high enrollment in government schools. Therefore, it is not surprising, that in this period of difficulty, enrollment in government schools has gone up even further, from 88.1% in 2018 to 91.5% in 2021. The economic difficulties faced by families and the challenges faced by low-cost rural private schools together have led to this trend which is visible in most states across the country.

School enrollment status: Age group 6 to 14: West Bengal ASER 2012 -2021



What is more surprising is that compared to previous years, the proportion of children currently not enrolled in school has also dropped. In the public perception as well as among there has been a strong concern, that the challenges of the time may make it difficult for many children, especially adolescent girls, to return to school.

The enrollment data from the West Bengal 2021 field survey does not provide any evidence of this possible “push-out”. But the actual situation will become clearer when schools open and stay open continuously. At that point, attention will have to shift from measuring enrollment to tracking daily attendance. It is only when daily attendance stabilizes at a high level that it will be possible to say whether every child is indeed in school regularly.

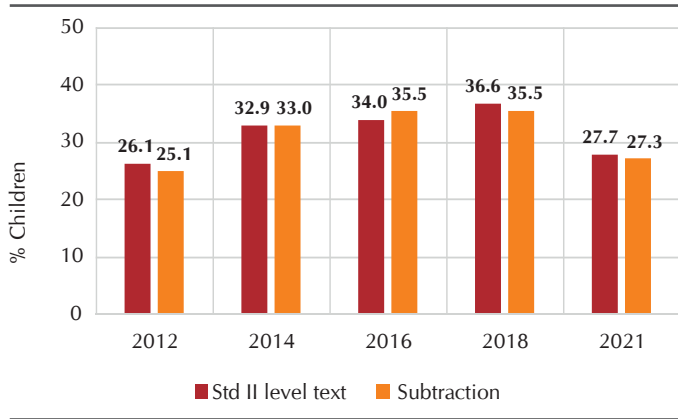
What about “learning loss”? Compared to other nations, schools in India have remained closed for among the longest duration of time anywhere in the world. Within India, West Bengal is one of the states where school closures have been the longest. It is commonly believed that by not being able to attend school, children have missed out on important opportunities. Especially at a young age, school provides an essential context for learning social skills and how to

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interact with others. On the academic side, not only are children likely to have forgotten what they knew, but have also forgone new learning opportunities. Given these facts, it is imperative to have access to current estimates for children's learning so that plans moving forward can be made on the basis of ground realities.

% Children in Std III : "Grade level" learning levels in reading & arithmetic: Government school children West Bengal: ASER 2012-2021



To start the discussion on learning and loss, let us look at Std III learning levels in West Bengal over time.

Three points are worth highlighting: First, learning levels (basic reading and arithmetic) were not satisfactory even in pre-COVID times. Only about a third of all children enrolled in Std III in West Bengal were at "grade level" (ASER measures children's ability to read a simple text at Std II level of difficulty. For math, to ensure that a child is at least at Std II level, s/he is asked to recognise numbers up to 100 and do simple operations like 2-digit subtractions with borrowing). The West Bengal status more or less mirrored the national pattern. Trends over time indicate that two-thirds of all enrolled children were getting "left behind" within the first two years of coming to school.

Second, the proportion of children at "grade level" in Std III was rising slowly over time between 2012 and 2018. Third, there is a significant decline in basic learning levels during the pandemic period; percentage of children in government schools able to read a simple "story" at Std II level of difficulty has declined from 36.6% in 2018 to 27.7% in 2021. A sharp drop is visible in arithmetic in the same period. Similar drops in basic learning levels are clearly visible in other primary grades as well.

For helping children regain lost ground, two key challenges have to be understood well. These points are relevant for when classes start in formal schools but also for any educational efforts being undertaken until then.

First, the youngest children, those going to Std I or II, have had no previous exposure to pre-school (anganwadi) or school. They are literally coming from the lap of their families into school. For them, coping with the current curriculum and textbooks for these grades is going to be both difficult and inappropriate. Children in Std I and II need several months of "warm up". They need to have time and support for getting ready – for school, for class and for learning. Launching them directly into grade-wise instruction is likely to put them at a major disadvantage not only now, but possibly for their entire educational career.

Second, the situation with older children – in Std III, IV or V can be best illustrated with the 2021 ASER data.

Std II level text	Std I level text														
<p>আমার বাড়ির সামনে একটা ডাকঘর আছে। অনেক লোকের ভিড় হয় সেখানে। নানা দেশের চিঠি আসে। সেখানে টাকাও জমা রাখা যায়। আমার মা ডাকঘরে টাকা জমিয়ে রাখেন। আমি তিনবার ডাকঘরে গিয়েছি। বাবাকে দিনাজপুরে চিঠি লিখেছি। ঘাটালের পিসিকেও একটা বড়ো চিঠি লিখেছি। আর আজ দাদাকে লিখবো। আমি ডাকঘরে গিয়ে একটা ডাকটিকিট কিনবো। সেটা খামে লাগিয়ে ঠিকানা লিখবো। খামটা আমি দাদাকে পাঠাবো।</p>	<p>গরমে আম পাওয়া যায়। মণির মা আমের আচার বানান। শীতকালে আপেল পাওয়া যায়। মণি আপেল খেতে ভালোবাসে।</p>														
	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Letters</th> <th>Words</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>লা প স</td> <td>লাল দুধ</td> </tr> <tr> <td>ক গ</td> <td>গোল</td> </tr> <tr> <td>ড ব ম</td> <td>তেল টিয়া</td> </tr> <tr> <td>ট ঝ</td> <td>ভোর বুপা</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>পাখি কুল</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>মোটা</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Letters	Words	লা প স	লাল দুধ	ক গ	গোল	ড ব ম	তেল টিয়া	ট ঝ	ভোর বুপা		পাখি কুল		মোটা
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ASER reading tasks are shown here. Each sampled child is given time and asked to read individually. Once he or she reads, the child is marked at the highest level he or she can read comfortably. All children from Std I to Std VIII are given the same reading tasks.

This method of assessment has been the same since the first ASER survey in 2005. Hence the ASER data set has comparable trends over time for more than fifteen years.

The table below shows the current situation using West Bengal 2021 ASER data for reading for primary classes.



% Children reading at different levels in different primary grades. ASER 2021

Std	Not able to recognise letters yet	Can recognise letters but not read words	Can read simple words but not sentences	Can read basic paragraph at Std I level but not higher	Can read "story" at Std II level and maybe also a higher level text	Total
III	12.6	20.7	17.5	19.8	29.5	100
IV	8.0	14.0	17.5	21.3	39.2	100
V	6.5	10.6	16.1	18.4	48.5	100

As you look across each row, you can see that within each grade, there is wide variation in reading levels. The Std III data shows that less than 30% of children are at “grade level”. Even by Std V less than half are able to read at “foundational” level (Std II level). In addition, in Std V approximately 17% are not yet beyond the “letter” level, another 16% can only read up to word level and another 18% can read sentences but not a longer story. Therefore, teaching children at grade level will not help most children. In Std V, 50% of all children will not benefit at all from grade level textbooks and teaching. In Std III, grade level instruction will continue to leave behind 70% children. In fact, grade level teaching or “business as usual” is the primary reason that there was a “learning crisis” even before COVID times.

One solution to this problem is to start with children at the level at which they are, and then enable them to acquire skills to move to where they need to be. This method, often called “Teaching-at-the-Right-level” (TaRL), has been developed by Pratham to provide effective and durable solutions to the problem of low learning. It has been evaluated multiple times by teams from Poverty Action Lab of MIT led by Nobel prize winners Prof. Abhijit Banerjee and Prof. Esther Duflo, and found to be an effective way of helping children build foundational skills in a short period of time. Instead of organizing children by grades (represented by rows in the table above), children can be grouped by learning level. For instance, if there are three teachers available for these classes, one teacher could work with all the children across these three grades who are either not able to recognize letters yet or can just about read letter but not words. A second teacher could work with the group that can read words but not sentences. And the third teacher would have “readers” (the remaining two categories) Using the data table above as an example, Teaching at the Right Level groups children by their actual learning needs (the columns in the table), rather than by grade (the rows). Grouped and instructed appropriately, even with one hour a day for building reading skills and another hour for basic math, children make fast progress.

The pandemic and its consequences were beyond our control. Now we need to look ahead and plan effective strategies that are indeed within our power to do. It is really what we do with our children once schools reopen or even before they reopen that will make a difference to their future pathways. The immediate goals for primary schools are very clear. These need to be urgently and single-mindedly pursued. Getting the youngest children “ready for schooling and learning” and helping the older children to “catch up” should be the only two priorities for education in West Bengal in 2022.