

# LEARNING LITTLE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

The latest assessment of how children are faring in schools in rural areas indicates there has been no dramatic improvement in learning outcomes. The picture that emerges from the Annual Status of Education Report, Rural (2018) is one of a moribund system of early schooling in many States, with no remarkable progress from the base year of 2008. Except for a small section at the top of the class, the **majority of students have obviously been let down**. The survey for 2018 had a reach of 5.4 lakh students in 596 rural districts. It should put administrators on alert that while 53.1% of students in Class 5 in rural government schools could in 2008 read a text meant for Class 2, the corresponding figure for 2018 stood at 44.2%; for comparison, private schools scored 67.9% and 65.1% for the same test in those years. Arithmetic ability showed a similar trend of under-performance, although there has been a slight uptick since 2016: an improvement of about 1.5 percentage points in government schools and 1.8 percentage points in private institutions, among Class 5 students. Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Kerala and Haryana did better on the arithmetic question with over 50% students clearing it, compared to Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and even Karnataka, which scored below 20%. A significant percentage of students were not even able to recognise letters appropriate for their class, highlighting a severe barrier to learning.

Now that the ASER measure is available for 10 years, the Centre should institute a review mechanism involving all States for both government and private institutions, covering elementary education and middle school. A public consultation on activity-based learning outcomes, deficits in early childhood education, and innovations in better performing States can help. At present, children start learning in a variety of environments: from poorly equipped anganwadi centres to private nurseries. The enactment of the Right to Education Act was followed by a welcome rise in enrolment, which now touches 96% as per ASER data. Empowering as it is, the law needs a supportive framework to cater to learners from different backgrounds who often cannot rely on parental support or coaching. There is concern that curricular expectations on literacy and numeracy have become too ambitious, requiring reform. It is worth looking at innovation in schools and incentivising good outcomes; one study in Andhra Pradesh indicated that bonus pay offered to teachers led to better student scores in an independently administered test in mathematics and language. The solutions may lie in multiple approaches. What is beyond doubt is that governments are not doing their duty by India's children.

The Meghalaya government must urgently ensure that all illegal mines are shut down

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