

# FLIP THE PAGE TO THE CHAPTER ON MIDDLE SCHOOLCHILDREN

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‘ASER data shows that even in 2018, basic skills of children in upper primary grades left a lot to be desired’ File | Photo Credit: The Hindu

After a gap of four years, the [Annual Status of Education Report \(ASER\) report for 2022](#) was recently released in New Delhi. This nationwide household survey that covers all rural districts in the country generates estimates for schooling and basic learning for every State in India. Data from 2018 and 2022 can be compared with longer run trends over the last decade to see how the COVID-19 years have impacted India.

The [National Education Policy 2020](#) gives high priority to the acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy skills especially for children in early grades. [“NIPUN Bharat”](#) (where NIPUN is National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) the government’s flagship programme designed to translate policy into practice, is beginning to have traction in many States.

Given that the policy and implementation focus currently is on early years in primary school, it may be useful to also understand how older children in upper primary grades are faring.

In 2018, the all-India rural enrolment figure for the age group 6-14 years was 97.2%. In ASER 2022 data, this is now 98.4%. The rise has been accompanied by a significant shift away from private schools to government schools. Several factors may be at play — decrease in family income, permanent closures of low-cost private schools, and the efforts of many State governments to provide services even when schools were closed such as mid-day meal rations, teaching-learning materials shared remotely, worksheet and textbook distribution.

On the ‘plus’ side, rising enrolment means that more students can benefit for longer, sustained periods of time from schooling. Completion of the entire cycle of eight years of schooling for each cohort of 25 million students is no mean achievement in a country of India’s size and diversity. On the ‘minus’ side, with more and more students going through the middle school pipeline and attending secondary schools, there is increased competition for post-secondary opportunities. Board examinations continue to perform a gatekeeping function. Acute examination stress, grade inflation in school-leaving examinations, difficulties of gaining admission into college, and lack of appropriate jobs for many school leavers are all consequences of high enrolment and completion rates.

Since its inception, ASER has measured foundational skills in reading and arithmetic. The highest reading task on the ASER tool is reading a text at Grade II level of difficulty. In mathematics, the highest level is a numerical three-digit by one-digit division problem, usually expected of children in standard four or so. The assessment is done one on one with each sampled child in the household. The child is marked at the highest level that she/he can comfortably reach. The same tasks are used for all children aged 5 years to 16 years.

ASER data shows that even in 2018, basic skills of children in upper primary grades left a lot to be desired: less than a third of all children in standard five and less than half of those in standard eight could do division in pre-COVID-19 times. These low levels which are worrying declined further between 2018 and 2022, especially in reading. ASER evidence suggests that basic learning levels of middle schoolchildren have remained low and stagnant for over a decade. The “value” add of each year of middle school is small.

In the last 10 years, much has changed such as new technologies, new knowledge domains, and new ways of operating. But within our school systems, many children are reaching standard eight without being sufficiently equipped with foundational literacy and numeracy skills, let alone higher-level capabilities.

Unless children have strong foundational skills, they cannot acquire higher level skills or develop advanced content knowledge. ASER data shows that an “overambitious” curriculum and the linear age-grade organisational structure of Indian schools result in a vast majority of children getting “left behind” early in their school career. In the absence of in-school mechanisms for “catch up”, children fall further and further behind academically. With this comes low motivation to learn and a lack of self-confidence. At the same time, as children reach higher grades, parental and family aspirations for the child’s future increase.

Our school system is driven by preparations for Board examinations. Academic content transacted in schools implicitly assumes that students are being prepared for college. However, the reality is that a college degree is neither relevant nor possible for most students who finish secondary school. It is also not clear that a college degree will lead to the prized white-collar jobs that most students and their families are aspiring for.

Now that schools have stayed open for most of this school year, most children are back in school, the urgency of dealing with “learning loss” is acknowledged, and we have a policy that speaks of “critical thinking” and “flexible pathways through school”, it is time to rethink and rework what happens with our children once they grow past the foundational stage of schooling. Much of the country’s efforts in school education today are focused on ensuring strong foundations for children in the early years. But it is critical that we remember that middle schoolchildren also urgently need support for learning recovery and “catch up”.

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