

The pre-school years in India: Progress since NEP 2020

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Background

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 opened up new opportunities for building strong foundations for children's education in India. The policy states that "currently, children in the age group of 3-6 are not covered in the 10+2 structure as Class 1 begins at age 6. In the new 5+3+3+4 structure, a strong base of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) from age 3 is also included, which is aimed at promoting better overall learning, development, and well-being" (p.7)

Bringing the age group of 3-6 into the ambit of the education structure is one of the key new elements in the policy. NEP 2020 states that for ages 3-8, three years of early childhood education and two years of formal schooling will together be the "foundational stage" for education in India. While the importance of investing in children's early years has been well researched for years, this is the first time in India that the pre-school age group has become part of the population that the education system has to consider.

The policy recommends that "Strong investment in ECCE has the potential to give all young children such access, enabling them to participate and flourish in the educational system throughout their lives. Universal provisioning of quality early childhood development, care, and education must thus be achieved as soon as possible, and no later than 2030, to ensure that all students entering Grade 1 are school ready." (1.1)

The policy outlines several pathways for ensuring that young children have exposure to early childhood education. Children can be enrolled in Anganwadi Centres, also known as ICDS centres.¹ Another option is pre-primary classes in government primary schools. Additionally, children could be enrolled in LKG/UKG in private schools or in free-standing early childhood education centres.

Thus, for the age group of 3-6, NEP 2020 lays out two clear goals — universal provisioning and quality early childhood education — both to be achieved by 2030 to ensure a strong foundation as children enter formal schooling.

What can ASER data tell us about progress towards these two goals?

How far have we come?

Pre-school coverage increasing over time

For close to twenty years, ASER has been collecting data on the enrollment patterns for children aged 3 and above.³ Each sampled household is asked where their pre-school age child is enrolled. Options include Anganwadi, pre-primary classes in government school, and LKG/UKG in private schools. For the period of 2018 to 2024, the all-India rural figures show that overall pre-school exposure is increasing over time for children who are aged 3, 4, and 5. By 2024, the proportion of children of age 3 who are enrolled in some kind of early childhood education program or pre-school institution is close to 80%. The same number for age 4 is close to 85%.

Table 1: Pre-school/ECE coverage in rural India: ASER 2018, 2022, 2024

Age	% Children enrolled in any kind of pre-school or ECE centre			% Children not enrolled in any kind of pre-school or ECE centre		
	2018	2022	2024	2018	2022	2024
Age 3	68.1	75.8	77.4	28.8	21.7	20.7
Age 4	76.0	82.0	83.4	15.6	12.3	11.4
Age 5	58.5	62.2	71.4	8.1	5.5	6.2

Note: Pre-school coverage includes enrollment in anganwadis, pre-primary classes in government schools, or private sector LKG/UKG classes.

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² ICDS stands for Integrated Child Development Scheme. Implemented by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, early childhood education and care via Anganwadis is one of the services provided.

³ The data collection format was modified in 2018 to include more categories of pre-school institutions. Hence, for much of this article data from 2018, 2022, and 2024 will be used. The usual nationwide in-person household survey was not conducted in 2020 due to the pandemic.

Being enrolled in some kind of early childhood institution from as early as age 3 is important because that is where the “foundational stage” journey for education begins. Having approximately 80% of all rural 3-year-olds and close to 85% of all 4-year-olds enrolled in early childhood programs is a truly a major achievement for a country as diverse as India.

Patterns of pre-school enrollment vary by age-group

The rural all-India picture from recent ASER surveys show that for 3-year-olds, Anganwadis account for more than two thirds of the enrolled population. The percentage of 3-year-olds in Anganwadis has increased from 57% in 2018 to 67% in 2024. If a child is attending an Anganwadi, it is likely that the s/he will also have access to health services, immunisation, and nutritional support. All of these inputs are an essential part of ensuring a child’s growth and building the foundation of future development.

As children get older, the picture gets more diversified. The proportion of 4-year-olds enrolled in Anganwadis was roughly around the 50% mark in 2018 and has increased to slightly under 60% by 2024. By age 4, depending on their location, economic status and availability of private pre-schools in the vicinity, families begin to consider LKG or UKG in private schools as an option. In the time period of 2018 to 2024, data indicates that a little over a fifth of all rural 4-year-olds are in private pre-school classes.⁴

Age 5 needs special attention

Thanks to policy pronouncements and practical considerations, age 5 has become a high priority and worthy of close attention. While each year leading up to the time that the child enters formal school is important, the year prior to entering Std I is of special importance. Private schools, even in rural areas, have had two years of pre-school as part of their functioning structure. Within the government system, the provisioning of this preparatory year is new and hence, is getting attention.

In the ASER survey, households are asked if the child is in pre-school/pre-primary classes or enrolled in primary school. In previous years, a significant proportion (almost 25%) nationally would be in primary school even at age 5. However, the 2024 figures point to a positive development — fewer underage children are currently enrolled in primary school at least in government schools, as compared to previous years. This is true for practically every state.

Going to school too early can be counter-productive. A child has to be cognitively and socially ready for coping with what formal school brings, whether in terms of curricular expectations or classroom behaviours. The decrease in the proportion of underage children in government primary schools in 2024 is welcome news. Earlier, for parents who did not have the economic resources to send their children to private pre-school but had high educational aspirations for their children, there

Chart 1: Age 3: % Children enrolled in different type of institutions: All-India ASER 2018, 2022, 2024

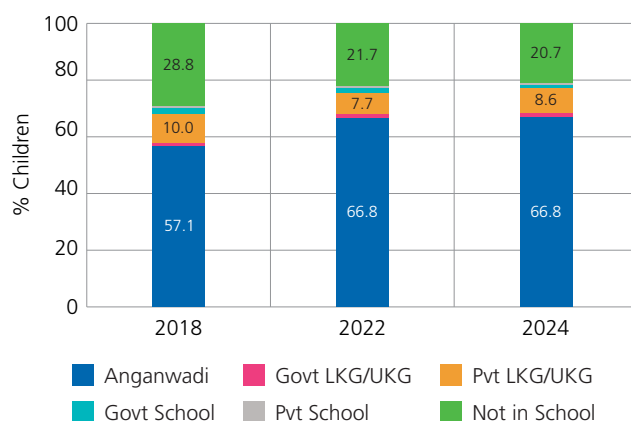


Chart 2: Age 4: % Children enrolled in different type of institutions: All-India ASER 2018, 2022, 2024

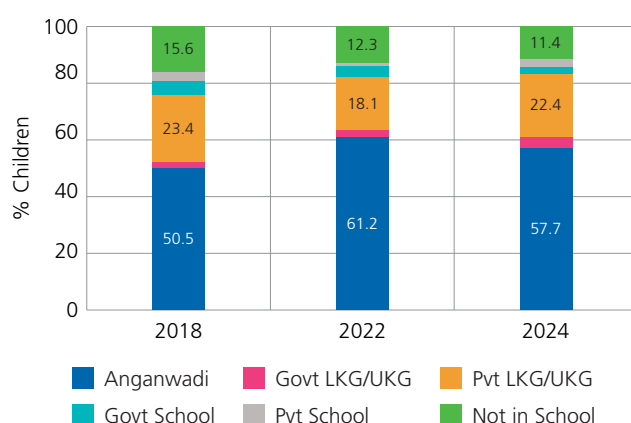
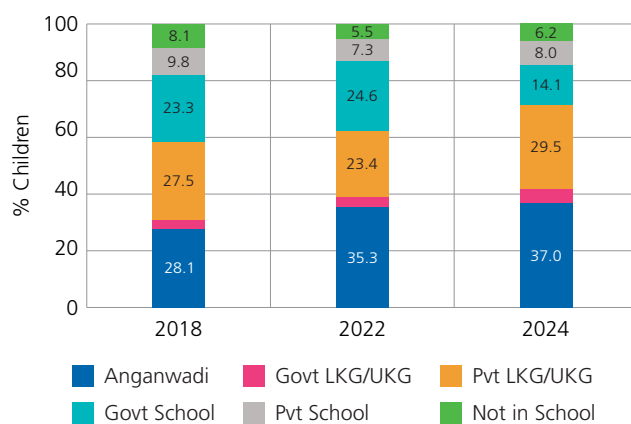


Chart 3: Age 5: % Children enrolled in different type of institutions: All-India ASER 2018, 2022, 2024



⁴ During the pandemic (2020-2022), schools, pre-schools and Anganwadis were closed. ASER 2024 data was collected almost two and half years after school systems and pre-schools began to function after the prolonged COVID-19 closure.

was no option but to enroll their children in Std I in government school. From parents' point of view, the rationale for this underage admission was that an early start to schooling would benefit their children's future chances of success. With the implementation of NEP 2020, a variety of efforts are being made in the government sector for providing access to and strengthening early childhood education. Hence, the clear shift in ensuring that children do not enter formal school before age 6 is a significant structural shift which should have positive benefits in terms of children's future development and learning journeys.⁵

Current enrollment patterns for 5-year-olds reveal interesting and diverse cases across states in India. These patterns are worth discussing, because future planning needs to be based on current realities.

First, let us look several examples of changes in enrollment patterns for 5-year-olds in states that have relatively high Anganwadi enrollment ratios (more than 40% children are enrolled in an Anganwadi) at age 5. In each of these cases, the enrollment patterns within the government sector have increased or stayed the same between 2018-2024. In Gujarat, a large proportion of children aged 5 are now enrolled in the pre-primary class in school but in the other states (shown in Table 2), the proportion of children aged 5 enrolled in Anganwadis has increased.

Table 2: Shifts in age 5 enrollment patterns across different institutions over time: Selected states ASER 2018 & 2024

State	Year	% Children enrolled in pre-school or ECE centres			% Children enrolled in school		% Children not enrolled anywhere	Total %	% Children in govt provision (pre-school or school)	Percentage point drop in age 5 govt school enrollment	Notes
		Angan-wadi	Govt pre-primary	Pvt LKG/UKG	Govt	Pvt					
Madhya Pradesh	2018	24.4	0.4	23.3	32.0	13.0	6.7	100	56.8	15.3	Increase in anganwadi enrollment
	2024	40.9	1.4	24.4	16.7	13.7	2.9	100	59.0		
Bihar	2018	36.4	0.7	17.0	27.4	6.3	11.5	100	64.4	8.3	Increase in anganwadi enrollment
	2024	48.3	0.4	18.4	19.1	4.2	8.8	100	67.8		
West Bengal	2018	44.0	9.6	21.5	16.8	3.0	5.1	100	70.4	10.8	Increase in anganwadi enrollment
	2024	55.3	10.3	23.8	6.0	1.8	2.7	100	71.5		
Odisha	2018	52.8	0.6	11.8	27.2	6.8	0.9	100	80.5	18.0	Increase in anganwadi enrollment
	2024	70.4	0.4	15.0	9.2	4.4	0.7	100	80.0		
Gujarat	2018	54.9	2.3	11.8	23.0	5.3	2.7	100	80.2	18.1	Big increase in govt pre-primary enrollment
	2024	54.4	23.8	14.5	4.9	1.0	1.3	100	83.1		

Next, there are some cases of changes in enrollment patterns for 5-year-olds in states that have relatively low Anganwadi enrollment ratios (less than 20% children enrolled in an Anganwadi at age 5). In some cases, like Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Jammu and Kashmir, there has been a shift in enrollment into pre-primary classes in school. In Rajasthan, underage enrollment in school has been accompanied by an increase in 5-year-olds in Anganwadis and also in private LKG/UKG. In Haryana, there is a clear change in the private sector. In 2024, there is higher enrollment in private LKG/UKG.



⁵ The shift in the age distribution in Std I is also clearly visible in ASER data. Nationally, from 2014 to 2022, age-grade distributions were relatively unchanged. In 2022, the percentage of children aged 5 and below in government schools was 30.3%. This number has fallen to 18.2% in 2024. In fact, all India ASER 2024 figures indicate that the proportion of "underage" children in government schools is now very close to that of private schools (15%) in Std I.

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		Angan-wadi	Govt pre-primary	Pvt LKG/UKG	Govt	Pvt					
Himachal Pradesh	2018	15.8	5.9	36.2	21.4	18.9	1.7	100	43.1	15.2	Pre-primary (govt) increase & LKG/UKG (pvt) increase
	2024	7.4	27.9	50.1	6.2	7.1	1.3	100	41.5		
Punjab	2018	5.4	8.2	57.0	17.0	10.6	1.8	100	30.6	-0.7	Pre-primary (govt) increase & LKG/UKG (pvt) increase
	2024	2.4	21.8	49.3	17.7	8.5	0.3	100	41.9		
Jammu & Kashmir	2018	9.7	13.4	42.3	18.8	9.8	6.1	100	41.8	7.7	Pre-primary (govt) increase
	2024	11.2	27.1	43.9	11.1	4.1	2.6	100	49.4		
Haryana	2018	4.0	2.1	46.9	20.7	22.0	4.4	100	26.7	6.5	LKG/UKG (pvt) increase & school (pvt) decrease
	2024	8.7	6.2	52.7	14.2	13.7	4.3	100	29.1		
Rajasthan	2018	11.6	1.0	16.7	39.9	21.6	8.9	100	52.5	14.2	AW enrollment increase & increase in LKG/UKG (pvt)
	2024	19.1	3.4	22.3	25.7	21.2	8.2	100	48.1		

Provisioning patterns have important implications for quality and children’s future pathways

Just to remind ourselves, NEP 2020 speaks about “universal provisioning of quality early childhood development, care, and education must thus be achieved as soon as possible, and no later than 2030, to ensure that all students entering Grade 1 are school ready.” (1.1)

With clear and impressive progress in pre-school provision, this is the right time to think about different dimensions of quality. The current situation with 5-year-olds may be a useful way to think about how provisioning patterns can be planned and linked to quality and future pathways.

In the government sector, children come into Std I with different past exposures to early childhood education. Depending on the state, the Anganwadi instructor may have recently received training on early childhood education, or not.

Some states have had pre-primary classes in school for some years (like Assam’s “Ka-Shreni”). Others like Himachal Pradesh and Punjab have embedded these grades in their primary schools in the last few years. In the same school, it is likely that the curriculum, instruction, activities, and materials in the pre-primary class and Std I have been designed to be aligned and possibly on a continuum. The disadvantage is that the pre-primary class may not have a dedicated teacher. Usually existing teachers in the primary school system have been deployed to work with the pre-primary grades, often in addition to their usual work.

Whether with ICDS or the education departments, there is considerable ongoing public discussion and action. Much less is known about the private school sector and how private schools deal with the pre-primary classes. This is the case, despite the fact that in many states, private players play a substantial role in the provision of pre-primary education.

It is worth noting that the NEP 2020 document mentions that “the overarching goal will be to ensure universal access to high-quality ECCE across the country in a phased manner.” (1.4).

Broadly, looking at implementation by state governments so far, three major strategies are visible for the current phase (from when schools opened after the pandemic till now):

- In states where a substantial proportion of 5-year-old children are currently enrolled in Anganwadis, a practical step has been to strengthen the early childhood education component in the ICDS system via training and on-site support. This is being done in states like Andhra Pradesh and Delhi.

- In states where pre-primary classes have been started in government primary schools, existing teachers have been trained for dealing with this age group (like in Himachal Pradesh and Punjab). A special mention should be made of Gujarat. By strictly mandating 6 as the age criteria for entry into Std I and creating a pre-primary grade (Balvatika), Gujarat government schools have seen a major shift in the age distribution of cohorts proceeding through the primary grades. Although there are six classes in primary school (one pre-primary and five primary grades), at least one grade (Std I last year and Std II in this school year) has very few children. Primary school teachers who deal with the “Balvatika” class have been trained on ECE and schools have been given appropriate materials.
- In addition, most states have implemented the “Vidya Pravesh” program — a three month school readiness phase in the first three months of Std I. More than 75% of the government schools that were visited as part of ASER 2024 reported doing school readiness programs for Std I, both in the current and previous academic year.

Looking ahead: Challenges and opportunities

The “foundational stage” of education as defined by NEP 2020 gives the country an opportunity to “leap forward”. If children begin education with a strong base, they will not encounter learning difficulties or deficits as they move ahead in their educational career. This is our best bet for a better future.

For this investment to pay off, we have to invest well and early. The foundational stage stretches across pre-primary and early grades in primary school. Since schools re-opened after the pandemic, energetic efforts are visible in many states for improving quality and outcomes in Std I and II. In the pre-primary section of the foundational stage, India has made significant and substantial progress with provision. Now attention needs to be paid to how quality will improve in the early childhood education space.

There are at least three factors that need to be considered for planning for quality ECE in a phased manner so that goals are achieved by 2030.

First, it is essential that any planning process starts with a thorough and grounded understanding of current realities. ASER and UDISE provide some data for this age group, but more comprehensive and continuous data collection efforts are needed to provide relevant information on a timely basis for decision making.

Second, budget considerations are crucial. A key recommendation of NEP 2020 is to “recruit workers/teachers specially trained in the curriculum and pedagogy of ECCE” (1.4). The current budgetary allocations for pre-primary spending in the education sector can enable an instructor to be on-boarded at a “para teacher” level of payment. While this can be an interim arrangement, education departments need to work out a longer run commitment to budget allocations and processes for identifying, recruiting, training, supporting, and sustaining dedicated teachers for the pre-primary grades who can provide the high quality education envisaged in NEP 2020. Within the Anganwadi system, if the early childhood education component is to be given higher priority, the requirement for additional resources must be clearly specified and projected. Between the two arms of the government that deal with young children (the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Women and Child Development), priorities, plans, and practices need to be aligned with the vision and goals of NEP 2020 for effective implementation. This is urgently needed at national and state levels.

Third, the “foundational stage” has been envisioned as a continuum not just in terms of provision, but also in terms of curriculum, material, training, instruction, monitoring, support, and assessment. In the last few years, there have been important milestones for building the system-wide base of the foundational stage. The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) was released well before that of higher grades. A special assessment of Std III (Foundational Learning Study or FLS 2022), and the release of new kits for this age group (such as “Jadui Pitara”) are all examples of the high priority that the foundational stage is being given by the central government and by the states. This effort needs to be maintained and strengthened so that every successive cohort that passes through the foundational stage emerges stronger by the time they reach Std III. At the same time, similar high energy implementation seen in the first two grades in primary school needs to be connected with the early childhood section of the foundational stage in each state.

A final point is worth raising. Educational levels of parents of young children have changed substantially in the last decade.⁶ Ten years ago, in 2014, 43% of mothers and 25% of fathers of children age 3-8 had no schooling. By 2024, this number has dropped to 24% for mothers and 16% for fathers. At the same time, the proportion of mothers who have completed primary school or higher has gone from 43% to more than 64% in the same time period. The corresponding increase for fathers is from 61% to 72%. How to effectively leverage this substantial rise in human capital in the family is also an important factor to consider.

⁶ For each surveyed child, ASER collects information on the number of years of schooling that their father and mother have completed.

In conclusion

NEP 2020 has laid out bold and ambitious goals for the country. In one of the clearest statements ever for quality education, it states that,

“Attaining foundational literacy and numeracy for all children will thus become an urgent national mission, with immediate measures to be taken on many fronts and with clear goals that will be attained in the short term (including that every student will attain foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3). The highest priority of the education system will be to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025. The rest of this Policy will become relevant for our students only if this most basic learning requirement (i.e., reading, writing, and arithmetic at the foundational level) is first achieved.” (2.2)

Today, more than a 100 million children are in the “foundational stage” age group. How we equip and support these children in the next five years will decide what India will be like twenty five years from now. We have made rapid progress in provisioning for education for pre-schoolers. Similar momentum, energy and effort for ensuring quality in early childhood education will be the highest impact investment India can make for the rest of this century.

