



Towards a National Programme for Universalising Foundational Learning by 2024

Study undertaken for

Central Square Foundation

POLICY BRIEF

I. Overview

The government, through its policies and programmes (SMSA, 2016; SSA, 2014; PBBB, 2014; NCF, 2005) has addressed quality of foundational learning through child-friendly curricula and materials, effective pedagogy, evaluation, in-service teacher training and supportive supervision. However, these changes have not lead to improvement in the overall learning outcomes in states.

In this study we systematically document some of the key successes and challenges of the policies and programmes in place, academic research and practices on the ground. This policy brief summarises the current status, emerging needs, key recommendations and proposes a national programme and roll-out for states, over the next 5 years, to ensure learning gains through systemic, policy, governance and foundational learning programme reforms in a time-bound manner in India.

II. Current Status – Major Issues, Emerging Needs and Key Recommendations

A Brief History of Foundational Initiatives by MHRD and the States

Large-scale programmes for foundational learning have been implemented in the past after the 1986 NEP (Lok Jumbish, UP-BEP, APPEP, BEP and other efforts of Unicef such as SPEED) and also within DPEP and SSA (such as CLIP and CLAP in several states, or the Latur project in Maharashtra). A budget head was created under Learning Enhancement Programme (LEP), to enable states to make headway in the early grades.

The recent years have seen a renewed development as listed,

Mathura Project, NCERT (2007-2012): brought an emphasis to foundational learning. The focus of the project was early grade literacy (EGR). The project involved the development of teaching and training material with thorough testing. A number of research papers, handbook on early literacy, training materials and the Barkha Series- a set of graded textbooks for classes 1 and 2 emerged.

MHRD released funds to NCERT to conduct workshops at the Regional Institutes of Education (RIEs) where SCERT and DIET faculty would be trained. NCERT helped set up Reading Cell in many states in collaboration with SCERTs.

Performance in NAS (2013): State results in class 3 and 5 (NAS 2013) were used as a reference point for planning the specific interventions for classes 1-2 and 3-5 as per guidelines issued by MHRD for preparation of AWP&P (2014).

Annexure to SSA 2011 (in 2014): An annexure to SSA (2011) framework was added with focused attention to foundational learning in 2014.

Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat (2014): started as a sub-programme to SSA with a twin-track (early reading and writing programme and early mathematics).

Utilisation of PBBB Scheme:

States have planned and implemented the PBBB scheme variously. There are –

- States that introduced an early grade programme utilising PBBB funds (such as West Bengal, UP);
- States that merged PBBB with existing programmes (such as Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu);
- States that did not have a systematic approach to using PBBB funds/ did not apply for PBBB funds (such as Jharkhand, Punjab, Haryana)

State Initiatives for Foundational Learning: Some states have implemented specific foundational learning programmes: This includes, HP (programme for classes 1-2), Odisha (MLE), Maharashtra (Pragat Shaikshanik Maharashtra), Tamil Nadu (S-ABL), Gujarat (ABL), Karnataka (Nalli Kalli), Assam and MP (focused programme on foundational learning).

Special focus on pre-primary education: Two major categories of states emerge from the consideration of pre-primary education –

- States that have co-located anganwadi centres in primary schools (Bihar, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Telangana);
- States that have added a pre-primary class in school (Assam, West Bengal, Haryana, Punjab, Tamil Nadu)

III. Major Issues and Emerging Needs

An analysis of documents, interviews with national level experts and interactions with state teams reveal the following major issues and emerging needs.

1. **Learning expectations/standards:** There exists a lack of focus on higher order LOs along with a distinct segmentation of LOs across subjects rather than taking a holistic approach at the FLN stage. Teachers find it difficult to translate the LO into action. Experts raise concerns about the extent to which LOs match expectations arising from child development.
2. **Teaching Learning Materials:** TLM is largely available in the states but most of it lies unused for reasons such as - absence of clear links between materials and LOs; dissonance between the assumptions behind the material and the user's context; lack of ownership on behalf of the teachers since they are largely uninvolved in the TLM development process.
3. **Teacher Trainings:** The cascade model has issues of transmission loss that compound along the chain as the trainings are not localised by designing closely around the academic and pedagogic limitations of teachers and by incorporating focal LOs and MGML practices. Trainings need to be made experiential with clear targets and agreed upon outcomes of the training.
4. **Teacher Support and Mentoring:** The role of BRCs/CRCs have been traditionally more administrative than academic. They are unable to facilitate a professional learning environment for teachers or provide necessary academic support. There exists a lack of clarity of roles and linkages between the SCERT, DIETs and BRC/CRC.
5. **Instruction Time:** The amount of time available for instruction is less than that anticipated in the programme guidelines and is often further reduced by non-scholastic activities. Disproportionate emphasis is laid on language and mathematics in comparison to aspects essential for child development such as supervised, unassisted free-play.
6. **Teacher Resourcing and Deployment:** Vacancies, spatial imbalances, ineffective deployment of surplus teachers remain a major issue. Unavailability of teachers trained in dealing with MGML realities remains an impediment. In some states, despite the availability of posts and funds, recruitment and transfers face issues beyond the state's control (e.g. Court cases).
7. **Assessments:** Assessments face issues of inauthenticity of data, lack of planned follow-up action and unreliable comparability between data sets – all of which make pinpointing the gaps even more difficult. There are contentious issues involved with assessments as the purpose and linkages between assessment data and planning for improving teaching/system health are not clearly defined. _

Periodic Assessments – Teachers lack understanding on planning formative assessments as a means of learning. Recently, a dissonance is beginning to develop as teachers are asked to focus on textbook content but the summative assessments developed by the SPO/SCERT focus on LOs.

Key Stage Exams – States feel that the materials they use and what they teach may be at variance with what NAS tests. They express the desire to strengthen their own capacities for developing and implementing assessments.

8. **School Readiness/Pre-primary:** Most states still rely on Anganwadi centres for school readiness which is one of the many responsibilities of the workers under the ICDS scheme. As Samagra Shiksha intends to take pre-primary in its fold, convergence between MHRD and MWCD is a concern. There is a concern that developmentally appropriate content and pedagogy, keeping in view, the diversity in the classroom will not be addressed. A need for re-imagining the role of all key stakeholders is seen. Recruitment specifically for pre-primary is largely non-existent across the country.
9. **Incentivising states:** States feel that central bodies do not provide a space for acknowledging the work done by them and often materials and norms are communicated rather than negotiated. The duration of validity and updating of PGI, NAS and other data sources involved in the planning process does not synchronise with the AWP&B and PAB processes. Transparency on reasons for removal or reduction of proposals would help states calibrate their AWP&Bs into essential and desirable sub-parts.
10. **Budget trends:** MHRD has released nearly 100% of proposed funds to states in recent years. Most states feel that the financial status is strong and issues occur due to operational inefficiency within the system. Some larger states like Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh feel that their budget envelope set by the PAB is not enough. PAB has had a high approval rate for programmes under LEP.

II.II. Key Recommendations

The key recommendations emerging from the above are as follows.

1. Learning expectations/standards:

- a. National consultative workshop/s can be conducted involving the NCERT, experts and state representatives to support the states in developing certain mutually agreed upon essential LOs along with a guideline to develop additional context-specific LOs if needed.

- b.** States should then prioritise a limited number of LOs looking at scholastic and socio-emotional aspects which should then inform the FLN work done in the states.

2. Teaching Learning Materials:

- a.** Only a limited set of TLM needs to be added to existing corpus in the schools - including high quality multi-use adaptable material. For this, a Guideline may be prepared and issued by the MHRD with support of TSG on the TLM (and the combination required) in different contexts, i.e., the kind of material be indicated rather than recommending any specific material.
- b.** States should organise district and sub-district level activities for teachers to generate locally relevant, contextual materials. (DIETs could take lead on this with assistance from SCERT). If required, teachers could be trained for the purpose.
- c.** School follow-up processes may encourage and expand the scope of usage of existing TLM.

3. Teacher Training:

- a.** In order to ensure progress on FLN, states should decide on a target for improvement in students' learning levels and fix a timeline for achieving the same. Performance standards expected from teachers should be developed against the targets set (these may grow incrementally over the years). Trainers should be rigorously prepared for delivering the required training, with the effectiveness of each teacher training being measured. States could then review and realign their training programmes based on the analysis emerging from this. The mobile based performance monitoring already in use in many states could easily be adapted towards this.
- b.** Teachers should be provided with support materials that they can adapt to their context.
- c.** MHRD should set up a taskforce to help states review and align their training, and also prepare their key resource persons/master trainers. As part of this, a series of national workshop may be held to help states evolve processes and capacities for evaluation of in-service training.
- d.** In order to reduce conflicting messages to teachers, the activities of each external agency (e.g. NGO/CSR groups) working within a state should take place within

the purview of the framework derived from the pedagogical approach and learning outcomes decided by the state.

4. Teacher Support and Mentoring:

- a. Academic and supervisory roles of CRCs and BRCs should be clearly delineated, and their roles and responsibilities should prioritise academic support.
- b. An observation tool to assist supervision and support to teachers can be made. This could be built around the performance standards and indicators being focused upon by the state. It could also be adapted for use through mobile phones thus enabling near-real time data.
- c. A national resource repository for curated sharing of good practices could be developed. This could benefit (from) the cluster and block-level meetings of teachers.

5. Instruction Time:

- a. A more realistic estimate and allocation of time between the subjects (and within as well) should be made. States may need to undertake short-term research studies in order to arrive at this.
- b. Teachers may be supported in effective planning to utilise the time they actually have. This could be effected through planning guidelines or simple apps, which help teachers make the best use of time as well as other resources such as materials.

6. Teacher Resourcing and Deployment:

- a. Profiles of teachers suited for foundational classes may be shared and local officials (including HMs and SMCs) may be encouraged to allocate the best teachers for early grades.
- b. Good practices in deployment may be shared and discussed with states.

7. Periodic Assessments:

- a. States may develop their own models for aligning assessments by combining LOs with state curriculum and textbooks. These could be then communicated to teachers through documents, media and training.
- b. Teacher training workshops should orient teachers on developing high quality assessment questions as well as their contextual application, and the analysis of data emerging from this for effective planning for learning.

8. Key Stage Exam:

- a. A longer term perspective plan would be more appropriate for large-scale assessment planning. This will ensure that the research questions are identified in a specific, reliable manner which does not change over the years. The details behind the conceptualisation of the assessment should be duly documented and made available with the data for future analysis.
- b. As students' learning levels do not reveal limitations at other levels of the system (teachers, HMs, CRCs/BRCs and DIETs), assessment does not get translated into corrective action. Therefore, it is recommended that a "vertical assessment" of performance at all levels be conducted.
- c. Capacity building related to the development, conduct and utilisation of data emerging from assessments is urgently required by states, in particular with a focus on FLN.
- d. The AWP&Bs need to strongly draw upon and justify their proposed interventions based on the large-scale assessment data. Though this is already being done (by including NAS performance in PGI), it needs to factor in performance at other levels in the system, i.e. "the pipeline" as well.

9. School Readiness/Pre-primary:

- a. It is important to prepare the school, teachers and the education system including the community for inclusion of 4-6 year olds in school. This implies coordination between WCD and DoE, a close analysis of curricular requirements with sensitivity to the age group, and careful preparation of teachers. States could also develop a framework for the evaluation of the success of their pre-school efforts.
- b. To compensate for the status quo, practice of including school readiness components at the beginning of early grade workbooks/textbooks could be supported and rolled out across the country.
- c. Surplus teachers in states could be deployed to pre-primary schools.

10. Incentivising states:

- a. An agreed upon long-term framework for rating states' performance with a focus on FLN may be utilised to incentivise states.

III. Framework for the National Programme

In order to give a fresh impetus to foundational learning across the country, a renewed national programme may be considered. It would be a framework from which states could develop their own customised programme, mostly within the funding parameters already available in Samagra Shiksha.

Goal

To eliminate learning gaps in foundational learning over the next five years by equipping and supporting teachers, supervisors and systems. The intention is to ensure that by the end of this five-year period over 90% children are attaining the expected levels of learning by the time they complete class 3.

To be attained by,

- Setting state specific objectives (an exemplar is given ahead)
- Setting performance indicators at various levels
- Incorporating in planning and
- Communicating to all stakeholders

Put together, the 4 steps described above are expected to result in a clear, achievable and incremental set of expectations being communicated to all implementers, supported by planning and put into action. Key components of the national programme are listed ahead.

Sample Focal Outcomes for Foundational Learning Programme by the end of Year 4

By the end of Class 1, over 90% children will:

- Speak fluently (in mother tongue) to share their experience as well as in response to picture books, narrated stories and questions asked by teacher, especially those beginning with 'how', 'why' and 'if'
- attain pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills as spelt out in the state curriculum
- develop a sight vocabulary and begin recognition of the more commonly used letters
- develop 'number sense' (i.e. an understanding of quantities involved) within 1-20
- speak and interact confidently in the classroom

By the end of Class 2, over 80% children will:

- begin speaking in state language in response to classroom processes, including to describe their experiences
- be emergent readers who can recognize most letters and vowel sounds, and read aloud simple sentences
- begin writing words and phrases in response to questions or to express themselves
- begin using mathematical operations with numbers below 100
- begin relating mathematics with daily life situations, e.g. at home or play ground
- be able to collaborate with classmates

By the end of Class 3, over 70% children will:

- Speak and read fluently in state language, and answer comprehension questions in writing, including those beginning with 'how', 'why' and 'if'
- Be able to describe their experiences, thoughts and feelings orally in state language
- Use mathematical operations fluently and accurately, with numbers greater than 100, solve word problems, and use mathematics to take decisions in daily life situations
- Plan and collaborate with classmates, and develop supportive relationships

III.I. Key Components

In order that the focal outcomes may be attained, the following are imperatives:

1. Provisioning the classroom and the school

- Stipulate and Ensure Sufficient Instruction Time
- Allocate teachers for grades 1-3
- Create resource rich environment with contextual, multi-purpose TLM

2. Classroom and school processes to ensure foundational learning

- Ensure School Readiness through PPS

- Articulate Pedagogy Appropriate for Foundational Learning
- Plan through In-Class Assessment and Assessment Data

3. Action needed at the state, district and sub-district levels

- Establish Foundational Learning Task Force at State and District Level as required
- Implement Focussed Teacher Professional Development
- Activate Supportive Supervision
- Re-imagine Key Stage Exams

III.II. Action Plan

The action needed at the state (and district) level to support schools in ensuring foundational learning is to,

1. Establish Foundational Learning Task Force at State and District Level as required:

In order to be able to efficiently and effectively implement the State Programme for Foundational Learning, it is critical to establish a Foundational Learning Task Force at the state level, with counterparts at the district level. The key responsibilities of these Task Forces would include:

- Setting state-specific focal outcomes along with improvement targets over a five-year period
- Development of the Note on Pedagogy for the Foundational Years and identification of TLM needs
- Identification of performance standards expected from teachers, trainers, CRCs, BRCs and others.
- Developing the Foundational Learning Improvement Plan for the state and orienting district teams in the same, and its incorporation in AWPs based on (assessment and UDISE) data and situational analysis
- Identification and development of district-level resource teams for the various tasks involved. On-going (experiential and reflective) CPD for teachers and supervisors around performance indicators
- Obtaining and using Real-time performance data; implementing on-going monitoring at state and district levels
- Orientation of leadership (state, district and block levels) on the ongoing activities

2. Implement Focused Teacher Professional Development

In order to ensure that the required teaching practices are adequately implemented for FLN, there is a need to:

- Conduct the in-service training specifically focused on the Foundational Years for teachers who are allocated those classes.
- Adopt an experiential, reflective approach – i.e. teachers should actually experience in the training what they are expected to generate for their children in the classroom, have the opportunity to reflect upon it and then present how they would adopt/adapt it for their own classroom. Teachers should be provided with support materials that they can adapt to their context.
- Develop these trainings around a more rigorous needs analysis – this involves stating the expectations from teachers (i.e. expected performance indicators), observing their current performance against these to assess the gaps to be covered, along with interacting with teachers to know exactly what needs to be focused upon.
- An agreed upon means of assessing teacher training and its outcomes (in terms of teacher performance) is required.
- Reduce conflicting messages to teachers, by ensuring that the activities of each external agency (e.g. NGO/CSR groups) working within a state should take place within the purview of the framework derived from the learning outcomes as described.
- Finally, MHRD should set up a taskforce to help states review and align their training, and also prepare their key resource persons/master trainers.

3. Activate Supportive Supervision

While in-service training helps teachers understand what they need to do (and why) it is only when they are supported in their classroom while teaching that new practices actually begin to take root. This is the role of the supportive supervision system (CRCs and BRCs, guided by DIETs and SCERTs).

In order to ensure that the targeted improvement in teacher performance and focal learning outcomes is attained, state teams would need to take the following steps with regard to the supportive supervision system:

1. Academic and supervisory roles of CRCs and BRCs should be clearly delineated. At present, the job charts in place have far too many roles and responsibilities, without prioritising of academic support roles. They also need to be seen more as mentors than officials, hence their support role has to be highlighted.
2. An observation tool to assist supervision and support to teachers can be made. This could be built around the performance standards and indicators being focused upon by the state. It could also be adapted for use through mobile phones thus enabling near-real time data.

3. Performance standards and indicators are needed for CRCs and BRCs too, who should be periodically assessed by DIETs.
4. A national resource repository for curated sharing of good practices could be developed. This could benefit (from) the cluster and block-level meetings of teachers.

4. Re-imagine Key Stage Exams

Though they require investment of much time and effort, periodic state-wide tests (e.g. NAS or SLAS) act as a means of assessing the 'system health' from time to time. However, the limitations of standardised tests are well known too, and they need to be implemented with caution, especially in the case of young children in foundational years. The following steps would help:

- A longer term perspective plan would be more appropriate for large-scale assessment planning. This will ensure that the research questions are identified in a specific, reliable manner which does not change over the years. The details behind the conceptualisation of the assessment should be duly documented and made available with the data for future analysis.
- As students' learning levels do not reveal limitations at other levels of the system (teachers, HMs, CRCs/BRCs and DIETs), assessment does not get translated into corrective action. Therefore, it is recommended that a "vertical assessment" of performance at all levels be conducted.
- Capacity building related to the development, conduct and utilisation of data emerging from assessments is urgently required by states, in particular with a focus on FLN.
- The AWP&Bs need to strongly draw upon and justify their proposed interventions based on the large-scale assessment data. Though this is already being done (by including NAS performance in PGI), it needs to factor in performance at other levels in the system, i.e. "the pipeline", as well.

III.III Role of the National Level in Supporting States in Attaining Foundational Learning

1. Key responsibilities at the national level

The national level would have a relatively limited and supportive role in enabling Foundational Learning to roll out across the country. Some of the key responsibilities of the national level would include the following:

- Bringing together the state teams with NCERT or other key resource institutions as required.
- Development of broad guidelines/framework for classroom, school, district and school level components mentioned above
- In planning, a focused plan for the first three years and pre-school or incorporation of class-wise AWPBs of states (if that is easier)
- FLN Task Force at national level (described ahead)
- Establishment of national and state resource centres / repositories for FLN
- Monitoring of progress
- Public reports on FLN status based on 3rdparty assessment, e.g. Linked with Shagunotsav
- National research unit to support on-going research (with evaluation) to improve implementation
- Organising national workshops on issues such as sharing of pedagogical models, practices related to TPD, supportive supervision and assessment, good practices and success stories as mentioned earlier.
- Finally, arriving at an agreed upon long-term framework for rating states' performance with a focus on FLN that may be utilised to incentivise states.

2. Establishing Foundational Learning Task Force at the National level:

The Foundational Learning Task Force at the national level, is envisioned along with counterparts at the state level. Key responsibilities of the Task Forces would include:

- Liaising with the NCERT and supporting the states towards setting state-specific focal outcomes along with improvement targets over a five-year period while agreeing on a minimum set of essential common characteristics across states
- Assisting the states in development of the Note on Pedagogy for the Foundational Years and identification of TLM needs, including a guideline for the purpose
- Identification of performance standards expected from teachers, trainers, CRCs, BRCs and others.
- Supporting states in developing their Foundational Learning Improvement Plan and its incorporation in AWPBs
- Identification and development of state-level resource teams for the various tasks involved, including their on-going (experiential and reflective) CPD for around performance indicators
- Monitoring the progress in the states and taking supportive action as needed
- Orienting the leadership (at national and state levels) on the ongoing activities

3. Parameters Of Success and Monitoring Required

In order to ascertain the progress being made, the following parameters could be monitored from the national level:

1. *Number of resource persons developed who demonstrate high quality training, mentoring, monitoring and on-site support skills as per performance indicators*
2. *Number/percentage of teachers developed who demonstrate high quality teaching including relationships with children and community, interactive pedagogy, effective use of local and supplied materials, and use of assessment as a learning assurance mechanism as per performance indicators*
3. *Number/percentage of children demonstrating age-appropriate learning levels in language and mathematics as well as social development (school readiness is subsumed in this)*

As mentioned earlier, though the indicators would vary from state to state, a minimum set of essential parameters may be common across states.

III.IV. Budget/Allocations Required

The national programme is less about increasing budget allocations and more about using existing provisions efficiently, in a targeted and carefully sequenced and coordinated manner to ensure effectiveness in terms of student learning. While funds are available for most components the following might require additional funding and this could be provided through the present AWPB process:

- Development of the Foundational Learning Task Force at the National level
- Development of the Foundational Learning Task Forces at the State level (though money is likely to be available in the provisions with the states for development of State Resource Groups)
- It is possible that in some states extra provision may be required for specific categories of TLM; however, if a case is made with rationale, present provisions should enable that.

IV. A Five-Year Rollout

Year 1: Set up phase

- Create Task Force at national level
- Organize national workshop/s
- Establish state level task forces
- Identify focal outcomes, pedagogical model, performance standards, TLM package
- Set targets
- Establish district level task forces
- Prepare trainers, supervisors, HMs (on teacher allocation and instructional time)
- Communicate with stakeholders
- Take baseline - Measure learning gaps
- Create Foundational Learning AWPB for Year 2
- Develop training, materials, assessment and other requirements

Year 2:

- Implement the Foundational Learning Improvement Plan
- Reduce learning gaps by 20% against year 1 baseline
- In every year the cycle of developing the Foundational Learning AWPB for the next year will continue.

Year 3:

Reduce learning gaps by 40% against year 1 baseline

Year 4:

Reduce learning gaps by 70% against year 1 baseline

Year 5:

Reduce learning gaps by 90% against year 1 baseline