



Strengthening Foundational Literacy and Numeracy in India: A Policy Analysis of the NIPUN Bharat Mission

At a Glance

Need for FLN: Nearly 70% of 10-year-old children in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read and understand a simple text, highlighting a global learning crisis. Strengthening foundational literacy and numeracy is essential to prevent long-term learning deficits and improve educational outcomes.

NIPUN Bharat Mission: The mission supports the implementation of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and contributes directly to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by improving foundational learning, reducing learning poverty, and promoting equitable access to quality education.

Coverage and Implementation
NIPUN Bharat is implemented across all States and Union Territories through school-based interventions, teacher capacity building, improved learning resources, and continuous assessment. The mission emphasizes collaboration among governments, schools, teachers, parents, and communities to achieve universal foundational learning.

Background and Context

Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) refers to the basic ability to read with understanding, write, and perform simple mathematical operations during the early years of schooling. These foundational skills are essential for children's cognitive development, academic success, and lifelong learning. Without strong foundational skills, children often struggle to keep pace with the curriculum, leading to poor learning outcomes and a higher risk of dropping out.

Despite near-universal enrolment at the primary level, India continues to face significant challenges in foundational learning. National learning assessments such as the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) have consistently shown that many children in the primary grades are unable to read grade-level text or solve basic arithmetic problems. The COVID-19 pandemic further widened these learning gaps, particularly among children from rural and disadvantaged communities.

Recognizing the urgency of this issue, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 identified achieving universal Foundational Literacy and Numeracy as the highest priority for school education. To translate this vision into action, the Government of India launched the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat Mission) on 5 July 2021 under the Samagra Shiksha programme. The mission aims to ensure that every child attains foundational literacy and numeracy by the end of Grade 3 by 2026–27 through improved teaching practices, teacher capacity building, learning resources, regular assessments, and community participation.

Objectives of the Policy Brief

- Assess the implementation and progress of the NIPUN Bharat Mission in improving Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) across India.
- Examine key achievements, challenges, and implementation gaps affecting the mission's effectiveness at the national and state levels.
- Evaluate the alignment of the NIPUN Bharat Mission with the objectives of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.
- Identify evidence-based policy gaps related to teacher capacity, learning resources, assessment systems, governance, and equity in foundational learning.
- Recommend actionable policy measures to strengthen the implementation, monitoring, and long-term sustainability of the NIPUN Bharat Mission, thereby improving early learning outcomes for all children.

Data Sources and Methodology

- This policy brief is based on a secondary review of literature and analysis of official policy documents, government reports, and recent research on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) in India. The evidence base includes publications from the Ministry of Education (MoE), Government of India, NIPUN Bharat Mission Guidelines, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, NCERT, UDISE+, PARAKH, ASER, UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2026.

The analysis adopts a mixed policy research approach comprising:

- **Secondary Literature Review** to examine existing evidence on FLN and early learning outcomes.
- **Policy Document Review** to assess the objectives, implementation framework, and provisions of the NIPUN Bharat Mission and related education policies.
- **Comparative Policy Analysis** to compare India's FLN initiatives with international best practices.
- **Trend Analysis** to evaluate recent data on foundational learning, enrolment, and learning outcomes, and to identify key implementation challenges and policy priorities.

Key Findings

Persistent Gaps in Foundational Learning Outcomes

- Despite significant progress in improving school enrolment, a considerable proportion of children in India continue to struggle with foundational reading and numeracy skills. Recent learning assessments indicate that many students in Grades 3–5 are unable to read grade-level texts or perform basic arithmetic, highlighting the need for sustained interventions in the early years of schooling.

Progress under the NIPUN Bharat Mission

- The NIPUN Bharat Mission has established a comprehensive framework for improving FLN through curriculum reforms, learning outcomes, teacher training, and continuous assessment. Most States and Union Territories have adopted state-specific implementation plans, reflecting strong policy commitment toward achieving universal FLN by 2026–27.

Teacher Capacity Remains a Critical Challenge

- Teachers play a central role in achieving FLN goals; however, variations in teacher preparedness, classroom pedagogy, and access to continuous professional development continue to affect learning outcomes. Strengthening teacher training and classroom support remains essential for effective implementation.

Unequal Learning Opportunities

- Significant disparities persist across states, districts, and socio-economic groups. Children from rural, tribal, and economically disadvantaged communities often face limited access to quality learning resources, trained teachers, and supportive learning environments, affecting their foundational learning.



Assessment and Monitoring Systems are Improving

- The introduction of competency-based assessments, learning outcome indicators, and regular progress monitoring under NIPUN Bharat has strengthened accountability. However, inconsistent data quality and limited use of assessment results for instructional improvement remain key concerns.

Strong Policy Alignment but Implementation Gaps

- The NIPUN Bharat Mission is well aligned with the objectives of NEP 2020 and SDG 4, emphasizing equitable and quality education for all. However, differences in state-level implementation capacity, governance, funding, and institutional coordination continue to influence the mission's overall effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

Policy Gaps

Inconsistent Implementation Across States

- The implementation of the NIPUN Bharat Mission varies significantly across States and Union Territories due to differences in administrative capacity, institutional readiness, and resource availability. This has resulted in uneven progress toward achieving Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) targets.

Limited Teacher Capacity and Continuous Professional Development

- Although teacher training is a core component of the mission, many teachers continue to require stronger support in activity-based pedagogy, competency-based assessment, and classroom strategies for foundational learning. Continuous mentoring and school-based professional development remain limited.

Inadequate Learning Resources and Digital Infrastructure

- Many government schools, particularly in rural and remote areas, face shortages of age-appropriate teaching-learning materials, digital devices, internet connectivity, and technology-enabled classrooms. These constraints affect the quality and accessibility of foundational learning.

Weak Monitoring and Learning Assessment Systems

- While the mission promotes regular assessment of learning outcomes, variations in data quality, reporting mechanisms, and the effective use of assessment results limit evidence-based decision-making and timely interventions.

Equity and Inclusion Challenges

- Children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, tribal communities, remote regions, and children with disabilities continue to face barriers in accessing quality foundational learning opportunities. Targeted interventions for these groups remain uneven across states.

Governance and Institutional Coordination

- Effective implementation requires strong coordination among the Ministry of Education, State Education Departments, SCERTs, DIETs, schools, and local authorities. Differences in planning, funding, and institutional collaboration continue to affect programme implementation and long-term sustainability.



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Policy Recommendations

To strengthen the implementation of the NIPUN Bharat Mission and achieve universal Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) by 2026–27, the following policy recommendations are proposed.

Strengthen Teacher Capacity

- Regular, practice-based teacher training should be provided to equip teachers with effective FLN pedagogies, competency-based teaching methods, and classroom assessment techniques. Continuous mentoring and academic support should complement formal training programmes.

Improve Early Grade Learning Resources

- All primary schools should have access to age-appropriate textbooks, teaching-learning materials, multilingual resources, and activity-based learning tools to create engaging classroom environments that support foundational learning.

Enhance Assessment and Remedial Support

- Schools should conduct regular formative assessments to identify learning gaps at an early stage. Students requiring additional support should receive structured remedial instruction and individualized learning interventions.

Promote Technology-Enabled Learning

- Digital platforms such as DIKSHA should be expanded to provide high-quality learning resources, teacher training modules, and assessment tools. Priority should be given to improving digital infrastructure in rural and underserved schools.

Strengthen Community and Parental Engagement

- Parents, School Management Committees (SMCs), and local communities should be actively involved in supporting children's early learning through awareness campaigns, reading initiatives, and home-based learning activities.

Improve Monitoring and Accountability

- A robust monitoring and evaluation framework should be established to regularly track programme implementation, teacher performance, and student learning outcomes. Data-driven decision-making should guide policy improvements and resource allocation.

Ensure Equity in Foundational Learning

- Targeted interventions should be implemented for children from rural, tribal, economically disadvantaged, and special-needs backgrounds to reduce learning disparities and ensure equitable access to quality foundational education.

Increase Investment in FLN

- Governments should provide adequate financial and institutional support for teacher development, learning materials, assessment systems, and digital infrastructure to ensure the long-term sustainability of the NIPUN Bharat Mission.



Way Forward

The successful implementation of the NIPUN Bharat Mission requires sustained commitment from the Government of India, State Governments, schools, teachers, and communities. Future efforts should focus on strengthening teacher capacity, improving classroom practices, expanding access to quality teaching-learning materials, and enhancing assessment and monitoring systems. Greater investment in digital learning infrastructure, continuous professional development, and targeted support for disadvantaged children will be essential to reduce learning disparities. In addition, stronger collaboration among education departments, local governments, and parents can create a supportive learning ecosystem that ensures every child acquires foundational literacy and numeracy skills by the end of Grade 3.

Conclusion

The NIPUN Bharat Mission is a landmark initiative aimed at addressing India's foundational learning challenge and improving the quality of early childhood education. By prioritizing foundational literacy and numeracy, the mission supports the objectives of NEP 2020 and contributes to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. However, the mission's long-term success depends on effective implementation, equitable resource allocation, continuous teacher support, and evidence-based policy decisions. Strengthening these areas will not only improve learning outcomes but also lay a strong foundation for lifelong learning, human capital development, and inclusive national growth.

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