



The Indian Journal for Research in Law and Management

Open Access Law Journal – Copyright © 2026

Editor-in-Chief – Dr. Muktai Deb Chavan; Publisher – Alden Vas; ISSN: 2583-9896

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 4.0 International (CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0) License, which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium provided the original work is properly cited.

Foundational Education in India: Policy & Implementation Challenges

Thummar Krinal NareshBhai

Abstract:

Learning basics builds the core of how countries teach kids - reading, counting, thinking clearly, getting along with others. Lately in India, leaders started focusing more on early lessons after launching new plans like NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat. Even though laws exist - the RTE Act since 2009 - many children still do not gain these essential skills. Schools often lack buildings, enough teachers, fair access across regions; poverty gaps add pressure too. Broken systems slow progress further. Then came the pandemic, which erased some gains already made. Efforts continue, yet results remain uneven across villages, towns, states. Old problems stick around while new ones appear quietly. This work traces how India shaped its base-level schooling rules, starting from early promises in the constitution up to recent shifts under NEP 2020, moving past older models like RTE. Looking through both law-based views and school system practices reveals gaps between plans and real classroom results. Even though strong policies exist on paper, actual progress depends heavily on smoother teamwork across agencies, clearer responsibility lines, better training for teachers, smarter use of student performance numbers, along with fairer funding spread. Progress hinges less on new ideas, more on fixing execution - small changes in oversight, planning rhythms, staff support might tilt outcomes over time.

Foundational Education in India Shaped by NEP 2020 and RTE Act with Focus on Literacy Numeracy Through NIPUN Bharat Influencing Learning Outcomes and Governance

I. Introduction

Learning shapes lives, opens doors, changes paths. Early lessons matter most since they build how minds grasp words and numbers later on. When kids miss basic reading or math at first, catching up gets harder each year after. Left behind in school often means fewer jobs, less

movement through life's layers. Because of this, leaders everywhere now focus energy where learning begins.

Schooling in India shows big steps forward, yet tough problems remain. After gaining freedom, the nation pushed to open classrooms by using laws, policies, together with major teaching drives. More kids now go to school than before; in several areas, nearly every young child can attend early classes. Still, just showing up does not mean they learn well. Test results across locations show too many students at the primary level cannot handle simple math or read basic texts.

Lately, basic learning struggles hit harder than before. Year after year, ASER points out kids aren't grasping core skills - especially in early grades - with groups like UNESCO and UNICEF stressing targeted help when it matters most. When the pandemic struck, uneven access sharpened - not school closing but what followed left little ones falling behind fast.

Worries about learning gaps pushed India to change its approach. In 2009, a new law made school free and mandatory for children. After that, the 2020 education plan put basic reading and math at the center of national goals. Instead of waiting, officials reshaped early schooling systems. One big step was starting the NIPUN Bharat initiative - it tied promises to practice.

Even with such efforts, putting them into practice is still tough. What students achieve depends on more than just laws - it ties closely to how systems are run, how well offices function, where money goes, how teachers perform, whether families get involved, and if institutions answer for their results. Looking at basic education means weaving together law, management, and how power works across fields.

This study looks into how basic education policies in India have changed over time while also questioning the key problems that get in the way of real progress. A closer look reveals gaps between planning and actual results on the ground where many efforts fall short despite good intentions behind them. Instead of smooth execution, what often shows up are delays, uneven access, and inconsistent quality across regions. Even when rules exist, enforcement tends to waver under pressure from local conditions or limited resources. Behind each policy shift lies a mix of political will, social demand, and bureaucratic inertia shaping outcomes in unpredictable ways.

II. Conceptual Understanding of Foundational Education

Little kids start picking up key abilities like reading, counting, speaking, thinking, and getting along with others when they begin school. What they learn at this point shapes how well they handle tougher subjects later on - plus join in community life more fully.

Reading and counting skills are called the top goal in India's 2020 education plan. When children can't understand words or do simple math early on, school gets harder as time goes by. Missing these basics makes catching up tough down the road.

Getting kids reading well means they can understand texts, write clearly, build word knowledge, while gaining confidence in using language. Working with numbers starts with spotting digits, doing sums, thinking through math ideas, then tackling challenges step by step. When both skill sets come together, learning in every school subject becomes possible, opening doors quietly but firmly.

Learning today isn't just about reading, writing, or math. Instead, it grows through reasoning clearly, speaking with purpose, managing feelings, working with others, alongside making new connections. Because of this blend, strong early teaching must balance mental growth with personal development - each shaping the other without one leading.

III. Evolution of the Legal and Policy Framework

A. Constitutional Foundations

Starting from independence, how the Constitution treats education has shifted a lot. At first placed in Article 45 as just a guideline, it wasn't required - more like an aim leaders hoped to reach someday. Because of its position among the Directive Principles, effort came slowly. Over time though, pressure built outside courtrooms and inside them. So what began as a gentle nudge turned into something stronger. Though never law at first, the dream behind those words gained weight. Eventually society started seeing school not as privilege but necessity. That change in thinking pushed policy forward. With growing demand, old ideas about learning lost ground. What once felt optional now seemed essential. From suggestion toward duty, the journey took decades. Yet step by step, the vision sharpened. Not forced overnight, still it moved ahead.

One ruling, *Unni Krishnan, J.P. versus State of Andhra Pradesh*, treated schooling as part of life's basic rights under Article 21. Because of that view, later changes to the Constitution followed a new path.

Free and compulsory schooling for kids between six and fourteen became a guaranteed right after the Eighty-Sixth Amendment in 2002 added Article 21A. Before that, it was only an aim written into policies - now it had full weight under the Constitution.

B. Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009

Out of Article 21A came the RTE Act, turning promise into law for free primary schooling. From that point on, rules took shape - classrooms needed space, teachers had standards to meet, student numbers shaped class size, while local groups stepped in to guide schools.

Out of nowhere, schools began opening doors wider when the new law stepped in. Because fairness mattered more now, every child who qualified got a spot without paying a dime. Where gaps once blocked entry, rules shifted to clear paths forward. With names recorded and systems checked, someone finally had to answer for results.

Still, some pointed out the law leaned heavily on getting kids into classrooms instead of what they actually learned. Even though more children were signing up, questions about how well they were taught didn't go away.

C. National Education Policy 2020

Back in 2020, India's education strategy took a sharp turn. Before that, most changes only cared about getting kids into classrooms. This time around, what mattered was how much they actually learned. Earlier plans focused on numbers; now the spotlight shifted to results.

Starting fresh, the plan set up a new 5+3+3+4 school layout while weaving preschool care straight into official schooling. Because basic reading and math skills open every later chance to learn, leaders said immediate steps across the country must close current gaps in student understanding.

D. NIPUN Bharat Mission

NIPUN Bharat launched 2021 targets reading and math skills by grade three

Starting with clear goals for student progress, it works by building stronger skills among educators. Ways to check results get more reliable through steady upgrades behind the scenes. Decisions in classrooms begin matching real data instead of guesses. Outcomes shape teaching methods over time, not the other way around.

IV. Current Status of Foundational Learning in India

Even with new rules in place, how much kids learn is still worrying. Year after year, ASER findings show lots of young students can't read simple books suited to their age or work out easy math sums.⁶

Even though things look better than during lockdown times, big holes in learning still stretch between regions and income levels. Not every child reaches basic reading or math goals - especially where money is tight or villages sit far from cities. Public classrooms, along with kids from underrepresented backgrounds, usually face tougher climbs toward catching up.

Outcomes shift noticeably by region when looking at National Achievement Survey results, showing gaps in both classroom resources and teaching standards.⁷

What we see here pushes past counting heads in classrooms. Learning outcomes matter more than attendance numbers, yet often get overlooked. Progress means students actually grasp what they are taught.

V. Implementation Challenges in Foundational Education

A. Governance and Institutional Challenges

It often feels like nobody fully owns school basics because power splits too many ways. Across India, running education spills between national leaders, regional teams, city offices, plus independent groups that act on their own.

Most of the time, layers upon layers of oversight make things hard to sync up; rules clash, actions fall short. National plans lay out big goals - yet getting them done rests heavily on how well each state can manage tasks. What looks good on paper sometimes stumbles when it hits local ground.

One state's schools might work better than another's simply because systems behind them differ. How well those systems function shapes student results in unexpected ways. Outcomes shift depending on which structures support learning where. Uneven success often ties back to how each place runs its education setup.

B. Teacher Shortages and Capacity Constraints

Most kids rely on teachers to grasp basic skills. Still, plenty of schools struggle to find enough trained staff. In countryside classrooms, one teacher often handles several grades at once. This setup makes personal help hard to give.

When teachers do show up, chances to grow their skills usually fall short. Old-school workshops care more about following rules than trying new teaching tricks.

Starting strong, good basic schooling depends on educators who use ways that put kids first. Ways like checking progress all along instead of just tests show up often. Not every student learns the same, so mixing teaching styles makes a difference. Through these moves, classrooms become places where growth happens more naturally.

C. Infrastructure Deficits

Still, even after the RTE Act brought better buildings, some schools lack proper rooms for teaching, books, online tools, clean restrooms, or supplies for studying. What changed elsewhere hasn't reached every yard. Gaps remain where kids sit on floors instead of desks. Internet access hides like a secret few know. Old textbooks reappear each year, worn at the edges. Clean water isn't always nearby when needed. Progress moves unevenly across regions.

Out here, broken-down buildings hit country schools harder. When classrooms lack basics, kids show up less, tune out more, results slip slow.

D. Socio-Economic Inequalities

Still today, how well a child does in school ties tightly to their family's financial situation. Facing hunger can slow learning, especially when money is tight at home. Health problems show up more often where incomes are low. When parents struggle to read, it echoes in their children's progress. Missing books, internet, or quiet study space makes catching up harder. Not having these tools widens the gap early on.

Out here, whether someone is born male or female, into a certain social group, part of an indigenous community, or lives in a remote region shapes their access to school. When laws say everyone can learn but systems stay unfair, basic skills still slip through the cracks.

E. Language and Multilingualism

Out here, schools face a twist: kids show up fluent in tongues never spoken in class. Home chatter doesn't match what's taught at desks.

Little kids understand more when they start school in their home language, studies show. Still, trying to teach in many languages runs into trouble because there are too few teachers and not enough supplies.

F. Learning Losses Following COVID-19

When the virus spread, classrooms shut fast. Millions of kids stayed home, their learning cut short. Unequal access to devices showed deep gaps in who could keep up.

Little kids struggled most since basic abilities fade without steady practice. Some lost ground in reading and math, while interest in schoolwork dipped along the way.

Even now that classrooms are open again, healing hasn't caught up - efforts need to focus where they're most needed.

VI. Management Perspectives on Foundational Education

Success in school relies heavily on how rules are shaped, yet execution matters just as much. Today's approaches to running public services can sharpen basic learning outcomes. What works often comes down to structure meeting action.

A. Data-Driven Decision Making

Nowadays schools depend more on number crunching to track how well things are going plus decide what steps to take next. Tools like UDISE+ show details about who is enrolling, what buildings exist, and if enough teachers are around.⁸

Just gathering information does not do much. To act well, insights must come fast, then shape real decisions.

B. Accountability and Performance Monitoring

When things go off track, someone has to answer. Performance markers that make sense help keep efforts on course. Reports laid out in plain sight shift how groups react. Every so often checking in changes what happens next.

What makes it tough is holding people responsible without crushing their independence through layers of rigid rules.

C. Stakeholder Participation

Working together, families, educators, local areas, officials, and learning centers shape strong early schooling. Schools thrive when everyone involved shares responsibility - no single group carries it alone.

Not every classroom sees it, yet School Management Committees do show up where families get involved. Still, how well they work depends heavily on the area you look at.

D. Financial Management

Without fair money flowing in, schools struggle to meet their targets. When cash gets spent wisely, hiring teachers becomes easier, buildings get fixed, lessons gain backing. What works? Putting funds where they're needed most - no exceptions.

Persistent disparities in educational expenditure across states contribute to unequal outcomes.

VII. Policy Recommendations

1. Build stronger early learning foundations

Before kids start school, their learning journey already unfolds. When early education gets stronger - via Anganwadis or pre-primary setups - children arrive at school better prepared. Not later. Much sooner.

2. Enhance Teacher Development

Start with basics - teaching methods matter most. Then shift toward supporting students who speak more than one language. Another path opens through ongoing checks that guide learning, not just judge it.

3. Promote Mother-Tongue-Based Learning

Early learning programs need educators who understand regional speech. Teaching materials must come in multiple tongues. Picking instructors fluent in native dialects helps kids grasp basics faster. Lessons in a child's first language build stronger foundations. School systems ought to design curricula across various ways of speaking. Staffing classrooms with linguistically skilled guides makes lessons stick. Content shaped around community talk supports smoother understanding.

4. Improve Learning Assessments

One way to look at testing is focusing on what students can actually do, not just facts they repeat. When checks happen often, teachers spot problems before they grow. Starting with skills shows where help matters most. Spotting trouble fast means fixes come sooner. Testing that values doing over reciting shifts how progress gets measured.

5. Leverage Technology Responsibly

Most days, good teaching still comes first - screens just help along the way. When everyone gets fair access, tech lifts up training, checks progress, while shaping lessons to fit different learners.

6. Strengthen Institutional Coordination

When national, regional, and city offices align better, gaps in execution shrink. Coordination smooths out mismatches across levels of governance. Missteps fade when communication flows more naturally among layers of decision makers. Efforts grow steadier if planning syncs up from top to bottom. Gaps narrow once everyone follows a shared rhythm.

7. Address Equity Gaps

Help for struggling neighborhoods might start with food programs, medical care, ways to get around town - then add tutoring help too. Sometimes it begins by filling stomachs, sometimes by fixing clinics; buses matter just like books do.

VIII. Conclusion

Every child's start in school shapes how well they learn later on, also what a country can achieve. From promises made long ago to laws that now protect every kid's right to study, India has moved step by step toward fairer classrooms. Laws like RTE did not appear overnight; they grew from years of effort, new thinking, sometimes public pressure. Today's plans - NEP 2020, plus missions such as NIPUN Bharat - show leaders finally focusing where it matters most: reading, counting, understanding at the very beginning.

Even big goals won't automatically change schools. Problems like weak oversight, underprepared teachers, broken facilities, unequal access, many spoken languages, or students falling behind still slow things down. This shows basic schooling must be treated less like a right on paper, more like a system that needs steady coordination across agencies.

Getting early learning right means weaving together what the constitution demands, decisions grounded in real data, smart use of public resources, yet active involvement from local communities. While India moves closer to its education targets, propping up how policies are carried out can turn pledges into actual classroom results. Making sure each child masters basic skills stands as more than just a school issue - deeply tied to legal duty, growth needs, shared

societal values. How well this core hurdle gets handled shapes much of where India's people power goes next.

Footnotes

1. *Unni Krishnan, J.P. v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, (1993) 1 SCC 645 (India).
2. INDIA CONST. art. 21A.
3. Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, No. 35 of 2009, India Code (2009).
4. Ministry of Education, Government of India, *National Education Policy 2020* (2020).
5. Ministry of Education, Government of India, *NIPUN Bharat: National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy* (2021).
6. ASER Centre, *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2024* (2025).
7. Ministry of Education, Government of India, *National Achievement Survey 2021 Report* (2022).
8. Ministry of Education, Government of India, *Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) Report 2023–24* (2024).
9. UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2024* (2024).
10. UNICEF, *Foundational Learning and Skills Development in South Asia* (2023).
11. World Bank, *The State of Global Learning Poverty 2024* (2024).
12. Constitution (Eighty-Sixth Amendment) Act, 2002, No. 86, Acts of Parliament, 2002 (India).
13. Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, *Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi Guidelines* (2024).
14. NITI Aayog, *School Education Quality Index Report* (2023).
15. National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), *Foundational Literacy and Numeracy: A Teacher's Guide* (2022).

