

Telangana's education paradox: Strong systems, weak learning — How policy can bridge the gap

Explore how Telangana can enhance student learning outcomes by addressing early childhood education, classroom structures, and language instruction challenges.

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A state-of-the-art government school at Irrum Manzil in Hyderabad built at a cost of ₹8 crore and equipped with modern facilities. | Photo credit: Nagara Gopal/The Hindu

Telangana finds itself in an interesting position. The State has built an impressive education infrastructure. NITI Aayog's Performance Grading Index 2.0 (2022) shows above-average performance in access, equity, governance, and teacher education.

Yet, learning outcomes tell a different story. The 2024 Parakh Rashtriya Sarvekshan found Telangana's Grade 3 students scoring 58% in language and 54% in Mathematics, both below the national averages of 64% and 60% respectively. As per ASER 2024, over 93% of Grade 3 children in Telangana struggle to read Grade 2 texts, while 69% cannot manage simple subtraction.

As Telangana develops its State education policy, there's an opportunity to strengthen three foundational areas that could help translate the state's strong systems into stronger student learning.

Reimagining Early Childhood Education

Research consistently shows that quality pre-school education creates ripples throughout a child's life. Children who attend high-quality pre-school programs are 11.4 percentage points more likely to graduate high school, are four times more likely to have higher earnings and three times more likely to own a home as adults. The question for Telangana is how to make such quality accessible.

ECE in India and in Telangana is delivered through three providers: Anganwadi centres which are managed by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, government pre-schools which are managed by the Ministry of Education, and private pre-schools. In Telangana, like the rest of the country, Anganwadi centres are not conducive to learning because Anganwadi workers are crunched for time fulfilling their nutritional and health duties.

Further, pre-primary sections in government schools are far and few, resulting in an exit from the public ECE system, especially among five-year-olds. According to ASER, enrollment of five-year-olds in Anganwadi centers in Telangana dropped from 31.4% in 2022 to 21.7% in 2024, while private pre-school enrollment jumped from 37% to 48% in the same period. Government pre-primary schools serve only about 2% of this age group.

This trend raises concerns around equity. The Comprehensive Modular Survey on Education reveals that private pre-school per-student costs are roughly 70 times higher than government options, a significant burden for families without clear evidence of better learning outcomes.

One path forward might be universalising pre-primary education by establishing pre-primary sections in every government school, similar to what Odisha has undertaken.

Where Anganwadis are co-located with schools, they could serve as these sections; where they aren't, new sections could be created.

To make this work effectively, the State could consider recruiting dedicated ECE educators trained specifically in age-appropriate pedagogy, a model that Uttar Pradesh is successfully following. This would allow the Ministry of Education to focus on learning activities while the Ministry of Women and Child Development continues its essential work on nutrition and health. The key would be ensuring collaboration rather than conflict, perhaps by offering Anganwadi workers the option to transition into these educator roles with appropriate training and career development support, which might lead to greater convergence between the ministries.

Addressing the Multi Grade Multi Level (MGML) classroom challenge

In many government primary schools, you'll find one teacher managing multiple grades simultaneously. Nationwide, over two-thirds of government primary schools face this reality. Research from the World Bank and Indian education commissions suggests these multi-grade, multi-level (MGML) settings reduce the time for focused instruction, adversely affecting first-generation learners who benefit most from structured support.

Telangana's school distribution presents an interesting opportunity. With approximately 24,000 schools serving 12,000 Gram Panchayats—roughly two schools per panchayat—there's potential to explore school consolidation. Such an approach could enable the creation of more comprehensive schools offering classes from pre-school through Grade 10, establish Gram Panchayats as clear governance nodes, and most importantly, allow for teacher reallocation to ensure that one grade has one teacher, especially in foundational grades.

To be sure, this is complex territory. School consolidation involves concerns around its impact on its communities and on access, making it highly political. Any movement in this direction would need extensive consultation with district and village stakeholders, careful planning around transportation and distance, and genuine community buy-in.

Rethinking language in the classroom

In 2022, Telangana introduced English-medium instruction across government schools to expand learning opportunities and respond to parental aspirations in an increasingly

globalised world. The shift encouraged the use of bilingual textbooks and teaching materials in schools which became an important step towards inclusivity.

What remains essential now is a carefully phased plan to help students and teachers navigate the transition from Telugu to English. Many teachers, especially in rural areas, are still developing confidence in using English as the medium of instruction. To build adequate comprehension skills and ensure holistic learning without losing fluency in both languages, structured support by the government should be sustained.

A balanced approach could serve the state well. Strengthening mother tongue instruction in the early grades, while gradually building English proficiency through higher grades, can ensure strong conceptual understanding and linguistic confidence. Investing in sustained teacher capacity building, through language training, classroom resources, and peer-learning support, can make this transition smoother. Over time, this dual-language strategy can enable students to learn effectively in their mother tongue while gaining English skills that prepare them for a globalised world.

Moving forward together

With ongoing efforts of the government to strengthen infrastructure, improve governance systems, and the recent recruitment ensuring adequate teacher availability, there is an opportunity to fine-tune how these systems operate at the ground level, in the crucial early years, in classroom configurations, and in the languages of instruction.

These aren't simple fixes, nor are they quick ones. Each involves careful piloting, ongoing evaluation, and responsiveness to what's working and what isn't. But as the State crafts its education policy, focusing on these fundamentals could create a legacy that Telangana's impressive systems finally translate into the learning outcomes its children deserve.

The foundation is solid. Now comes the work of building thoughtfully upon it.

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