

1. Foundational learning: Let's not delay the NEP

Context:

- The draft National Education Policy (NEP) 2019—the first update in almost three decades—is potentially a game changer as it aims to bring some long-awaited shifts in the education continuum and offers a clear pathway of Reform.

Background:

- The Committee for Draft National Education Policy (Chair: Dr. K. Kasturirangan) submitted its report on May 31, 2019. The Committee was constituted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development in June 2017.
- The report proposes an education policy, which seeks to address the challenges of: (i) access, (ii) equity, (iii) quality, (iv) affordability, and (v) accountability faced by the current education system.

Some Important Highlights of the Draft Policy:

1. **High-quality early Childhood Care** and education will be provided for all children between the ages of 3 and 6 by 2025.
2. Every student will start achieving **age-appropriate foundational literacy** and numeracy by 2025.
3. The curriculum and pedagogical structures will be designed anew to be appropriate and effective, based on children's cognitive and socio-emotional development.
4. The curriculum will be integrated and flexible with equal emphasis on all subjects and fields. There will be no separation of curricular, co-curricular or extra-curricular areas—with all in a single category of equal importance
5. Vocational and academic streams will be integrated and offered to all students
6. The draft Policy recommends extending the ambit of the RTE Act to include early childhood education and secondary school education.

This would extend the coverage of the Act to all children between the ages of three to 18 years.

7. The draft Policy recommends that teachers should be deployed with a particular school complex for at least five to seven years. Further, teachers will not be allowed to participate in any non-teaching activities (such as cooking mid-day meals or participating in vaccination campaigns) during school hours that could affect their Teaching Capacities.

Priority Towards Foundational Learning:

- According to the draft NEP, India's learning crisis is rooted in foundational learning, and it rightly states that "our highest priority must be to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school and beyond by 2025.
- The rest of the policy will be largely irrelevant for such a large portion of our students if this most basic learning is not first achieved."
- Today's primary school-going students will join India's workforce by 2030, and to reap the benefits of our demographic dividend, we need to start with building a strong foundation.
- We know that if we fail on this, we fail on everything: We fail on poverty reduction, human capital, GDP, and so on ... there is a lot riding on bridging this critical gap in our education system.
- **A World Bank report** that was released last month shows **that 53% of all children** in low- and middle-income countries suffer from **learning poverty, which means that they are unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of 10.**
- To galvanise this progress and to meet the Sustainable Development Goal on education (**SDG 4: Quality Education**), the World Bank launched a new learning target to cut the learning poverty rate by at least half before 2030.
- This ambitious goal can only be achieved if India—which has the maximum number of primary school-going children—can show a massive improvement in foundational learning and cut its current learning poverty level of 54.8% by more than half in the next decade.

What will do to operationalise the focus on Foundational Learning?

- First, a strong thrust by the Centre in the form of **a national mission backed by technical and funding guidelines** will catalyse demand for critical reforms at the state level.
- In the current financing structure, foundational learning is largely dependent on the Union government's schemes, but the central government can ring-fence funding to states for early grade interventions; in turn, states could be mandated to share a three- to five-year plan on how they plan to achieve universal foundational learning.
- Second, **clear goal setting and alignment of sharp metrics.**
- In primary schools, a teacher's daily dilemma is to figure out what to teach and to whom. To complete the curriculum, teachers usually choose to focus on the 'top of the class', leaving others to catch up on their own.

- This can be solved by **identifying and communicating well-defined indicators or competencies** such as alphabet and word recognition, oral reading fluency and comprehension of short stories
- Setting these expectations amongst teachers and parents, and socialising them at district and block level by introducing competition, will ensure action in the classrooms.
- Third, **the central government will also need to ensure availability of independent, reliable and comparable data** to all the actors on a regular basis to create an environment where there is both urgency towards achieving the critical goals by 2025 and providing incentives for improvement at all levels.

Conclusion:

- The NEP, once implemented, can play a critical role in the transformation of our education system and ensure that today's primary school students become productive and empowered citizens of India who will drive the country towards its \$10-trillion ambition.
- To put the policy into action, the state departments, educators, NGOs, parents and students will bring the sum of their considerable talent, commitment and resourcefulness to bear so that we see meaningful, measurable progress.