CENTRAL SQUARE FOUNDATION

Scaling Systemic Change for Lasting Learning Impact

CSF is a trusted enabler and catalytic advisor for systems reform, working towards strengthening learning systems, for all students to be NIPUN by 2026-27. At the State level, CSF works as Technical Excellence Partners/ Advisors.

Central Square Foundation (CSF), established in 2012, is a not-for-profit organisation committed to improving learning outcomes for all school-going children across India through system-led reforms. As a catalytic enabler, the Foundation drives initiatives that bridge innovation, policy, and practice, ensuring learning impact at scale across 14 states.

A Strategic Push for Foundational Learning

At the heart of CSF's mission is its strategic focus on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), which drives its collaborative efforts with 11 state governments to design and execute statewide FLN Missions. Additionally, the Foundation prioritises EdTech integration, aiming to deploy digital solutions for both in-class and at-home learning.

CSF is also deeply committed to Early Childhood Education (ECE) reforms, recognising the critical role it plays in laying a strong foundation for children's learning journeys. Additionally, CSF works in the area of School Governance, extending its system-level approach to both private and government schools to strengthen the country's education landscape.

CSF is a trusted enabler and catalytic advisor for systems reform, working towards strengthening learning systems to ensure all students become NIPUN by 2026-27. At the state level, the Foundation works as a Technical Excellence Partner/ Advisor. In FLN's system-led reforms, CSF teams collaborate as technical partners with the Departments of Education, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) Office, and the State Council of Educational Training and Research (SCERT) to support states in the design, rollout, and monitoring of State FLN Missions, reaching every teacher and student in every classroom.

CSF teams serve as catalytic enablers at the district level, working with education officials, mentors, and teachers to ensure effective implementation of State FLN Missions.

Positive Outcomes

From a system reform perspective, it has been heartening to see state education departments operating in 'mission mode' and designing long-lasting interventions that enhance capacity at all levels to deliver FLN outcomes for children. Notably, states have developed customised solutions suited to their specific contexts.

For example:

- Uttar Pradesh (UP) institutionalised a new cadre of academic resource persons in each block to provide training and mentoring support to all FLN teachers, tracking progress through spot assessments in schools.
- Haryana introduced the role of an FLN coordinator at the district level, working closely with district and block education officers to drive mission outcomes.
- Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Tamil Nadu hired young professionals as FLN fellows to energise districts and blocks for mission implementation.

CSF has observed states like Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and UP creating long-term solutions, such as improved textbooks, student workbooks, and teacher guides with structured daily lesson plans.

This means FLN-grade materials have been permanently enhanced and aligned with the new National Curriculum Framework (NCF). Over time, teachers and the entire system are expected to increasingly leverage these resources to support students more effectively.

Another crucial development during the mission has been a better understanding of learning outcomes (NIPUN Lakshyas). Ensuring the entire system comprehends these outcomes has led to the successful tracking of children's weekly and quarterly sub-learning outcomes. States have made significant progress in communicating these goals to stakeholders and providing high-quality assessment tools at the school, district, and state levels to continuously monitor progress.

An interesting example of using technology for governance is Uttar Pradesh's NIPUN Gunvatta app for mentoring visits. In December 2023:

- Mentors used the app to visit more than 1,79,000 schools for classroom observations and spot assessments.
- 1,05,000 teachers used the app monthly to enhance their teaching practices.

The Vidya Samiksha Kendras (VSKs) being established in various states are further improving governance. For instance, VSK Gujarat collects real-time student-wise data on learning outcomes for over 50 lakh students in government and aided schools, laying the foundation for personalised learning solutions.

Challenges

India's education landscape presents a paradox: while children are attending school, many are not learning.

According to UDISE+ (2021-22) data, the gross enrolment rate (GER) for children in the primary age group (3-10 years) is 100%. However, surveys indicate alarmingly low FLN attainment levels. The World Bank estimates India's Learning Poverty level at 56.1%, meaning more than half of children under 10 cannot read a simple text. In stark contrast, neighbouring countries such as China and Sri Lanka have significantly lower learning poverty levels, ranging between 15-18%.

The ASER 2024 report highlights:

The latest findings from the Annual Status of Education Report 2024 indicate a turning point for India's education system, showing a rise in foundational learning outcomes, especially among students in Grade 3, at both national and state levels.

- At the National level, Literacy levels improved from 20.9% (2018) to 23.4% (2024) and Numeracy levels from 20.9% (2018) to 27.6% (2024).

- At the State level, FLN level learning outcomes improved significantly across states over the years. In Uttar Pradesh, 60 districts saw at least a 5 percentage point rise in 2024 among 8 to 10-year-olds reading a Grade 2 text, as compared to 2018.

However, India still faces a huge learning crisis as the latest ASER 2024 data would demonstrate: 77% students in Grade 3 in govt. schools in rural India cannot read Grade 2 text & 72 per cent students in Grade 3 schools in rural India cannot do Subtraction. However, this crisis is led by three interdependent factors:

(i) Classroom-Level Challenges

- Ineffective teaching practices and inadequate instructional time

  o 45% of instructional time is lost yearly due to teachers managing multi-grade classrooms, absenteeism, or administrative duties.

  o 70% of teaching time is spent on traditional rote learning, which does not guarantee student comprehension.

(ii) Administrative Challenges

- Focus on infrastructure over learning outcomes

  o School monitoring visits often prioritise syllabus completion and administrative records rather than assessing student learning.

  o Teacher training success is measured by the percentage of teachers trained, rather than improvements in classroom teaching quality.

  o Only 30% of classrooms have teaching-learning materials beyond textbooks.

  o Many states lack a well-trained mentor cadre to support teachers effectively.

(iii) Structural Challenges

- Lack of focus on improving learning outcomes

  o Unlike higher grades, where board exam performance is tracked, early-grade learning remains a low priority.

  o Education systems tend to emphasise visible metrics like infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and enrolment over actual learning improvements.

  o Weak accountability—teaching quality and student performance do not influence teacher salaries, promotions, or transfers.

Solving the complex FLN challenge requires a long-term reform approach and collaboration among multiple ecosystem experts. CSF has adopted an integrated coalition approach, where the government serves as the anchor for large-scale implementation, while CSF and its partners drive research and evidence-based interventions. While building its own expertise, CSF actively collaborates with strategic and technical partners to advance FLN reforms across the country.

Looking Ahead

CSF's focus remains on sustaining the momentum of our system- reform work on FLN at the district level to drive state FLN missions to fruition. The goal is to ensure that every child achieves proficiency in both language and numeracy skills.

Furthermore, with advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), CSF is excited about leveraging technology for education. This year marks the beginning of AI integration in classrooms, aiming to enhance teaching and learning experiences for both students and teachers.

"
With the rapidly evolving landscape of language models and multi-modal solutions, we are excited about enhanced teaching and learning experiences. As with all our work, we see this journey progressing from the build-and-pilot mode of pedagogically rigorous solutions to deployment at scale.

Shaveta Sharma-Kukreja
CEO & MD, Central Square Foundation