

# ASER 2017 Shows India's Secondary Education Sector Is Failing to Impart Basic Skills

 [thewire.in/education/aser-2017-shows-indias-secondary-education-sector-failing-impart-basic-skills](http://thewire.in/education/aser-2017-shows-indias-secondary-education-sector-failing-impart-basic-skills)



ASER's statistics have shown how the ability of grade 8 students has been consistently falling over the years, coinciding with the increase in enrolment rates. Credit: TESS India/Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0)

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2017 'Beyond Basics' was recently released and is unfortunately on expected lines. The report highlights the sorry state of education when it comes to India's 14-18-year-olds and asks rather uncomfortable questions that policy

practitioners must find answers to. In an earlier article, we had outlined some issues that have plagued India's primary education sector and some anticipations that we had from the ASER 2017 report. Not surprisingly, we see a repetition of the same issues when it comes to India's secondary education space.

Previous ASER reports observed that despite high enrolment ratios of over 96% in the last eight years in the primary education sector, improvement in reading outcomes and arithmetic ability continues to be low. Moreover, a large proportion of students in both government and private schools continue to be below the 'Grade level'. Grade level means that a student can deal with what is expected of her in that grade.

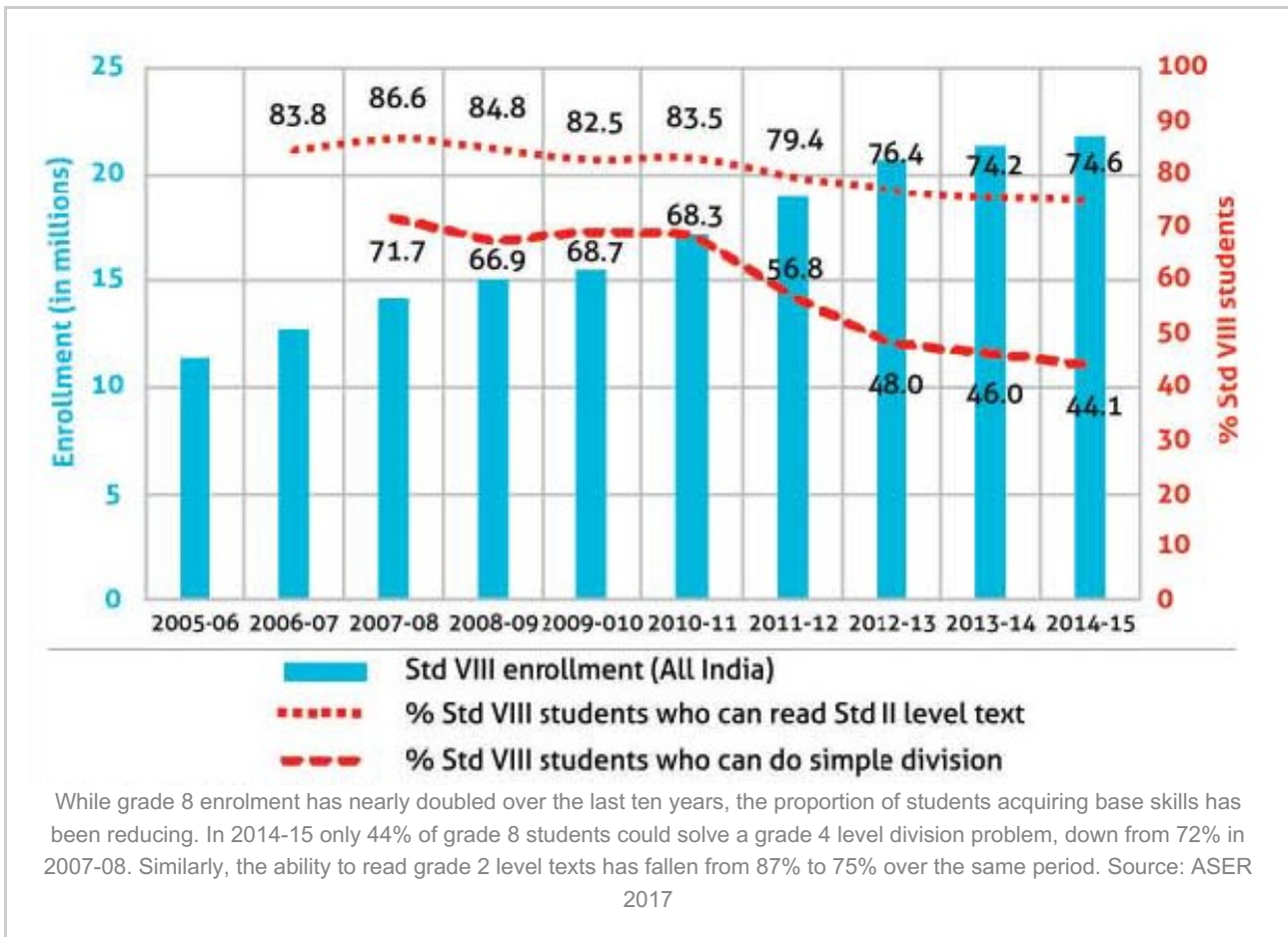
The ASER 2017 is targeted to look 'beyond basics': the age group between 14-18, primarily those outside the Right to Education ambit and on the verge of entering adulthood. The government's flagship Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) launched in 2009 and re-booted in 2013 as RMSA-Integrated has not been much of a success in India's secondary education scene.

### **'Aspirations' of young India**

What we find as a salient feature of this report is the coverage on the aspirations of young India. Capturing 'aspirations' by well-defined metrics is a tough ask, very few datasets across the world capture them with some rigour. The Young Lives Survey in Peru is one example that comes to our mind that captures subjective well-being and is actively used by researchers to gauge aspiration-achievement shortfall and their reasons. While successive governments pride over India's sizable 'demographic dividend', the ASER 2017 points starkly to the basic skill gaps that plague our young population.

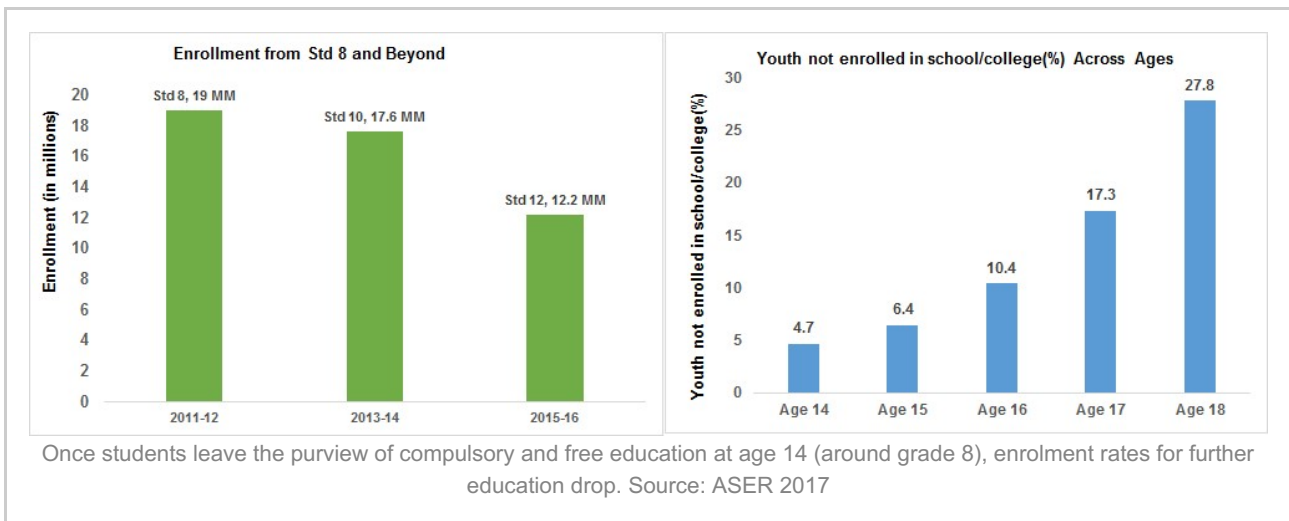
Before documenting some necessary takeaways from the ASER 2017 report, it is prudent to mention that the complexity of the data collected makes the national estimates a summation of estimates generated at the district level (24 states, 26 districts, 23,868 households and 28,323 youths).

Like the primary education sector, enrolment rates have also been high and increasing in the secondary education space. The RTE Act covers mandatory and free schooling up until the age of 14, or roughly grade 8. ASER surveys show that enrolment in grade 8 has been steadily increasing from less than 50% in 2005-06 to close to 90% in 2014-15. However, the quality of education remains a concern. ASER's statistics have shown how the ability of grade 8 students has been consistently falling over the years, coinciding with the increase in enrolment rates.



## Enrolment rates after grade 8

Another important issue is analysing how enrolment rates develop after grade 8, or once students are no longer under the purview of the RTE Act. Looking at the 2011-12 grade 8 cohort, the findings show about a one-third decline until grade 12, indicative of a trend of increasing dropout rates after grade 8. The same trend is reflected when enrolment rates are analysed by age, showing a steady increase from age 14-18.



The reasons for discontinuing studies vary. Around 25% of the youth who dropped out after grade 8 said they did so due to financial reasons. Worryingly, a large number of students (34% of boys and 19% of girls) said they dropped out due to lack of interest, pointing to deficiencies in the curriculum and teaching infrastructure. One-third of girl students said they dropped out due to 'family constraints'.

---

## Also read: Enrolment Rates Are Climbing. So What Explains the Sorry State of India's Education Sector?

---

Another startling fact is that about 17% of students dropped out because they failed in their studies. Current government policy doesn't allow schools to fail students until grade 8. As the ASER report points out, while the intention of the policy is commendable, there need to be measures in place to identify and focus on students who have fallen behind in the earlier grades. Currently, it would seem that the policy of not failing students has led to an adverse consequence where students left behind are not identified until they end up failing exams after grade 8.

Despite the fall in enrolment rates, over 86% of youth in the 14-18 range continue to be within the formal education system. Only about 5% are taking some type of vocational training, the majority of which are less than three months long.

Interestingly, a substantial proportion of youth in this age group is employed, irrespective of whether they are engaged in formal education or not. Overall, 42% of the youth is employed, including 39% of students engaged in formal education and 60% of students who have dropped out. Most of the work – over 70% – is on their own family's farm. It is instructive to keep in mind here that ASER is a rural survey and urban deficiencies are still a black box when it comes to concrete data.

However, after accounting for work and enrolment in vocational courses, over one-third of the youth who have dropped out of education are not engaged in any kind of activity, i.e. neither studying, preparing for exams or employed – with nearly 75% of them being girls.

As shown in Figure 1, youth in the 14-18 age bracket didn't have the skills expected of them from an elementary education and worryingly, there has been a declining trend in these skills. Apart from basic reading and arithmetic, ASER also conducted some testing on common everyday skills like counting money, reading maps, measuring length, calculating time, etc. The performance of the youth in these tasks was noticeably better.

The surveys use some specific metrics like access to mobile phones and bank accounts as proxies of youths' exposure to the outside world. The findings are mixed: Approximately three-fourths of the youth surveyed had access to mobile phones and had their own bank account. But only about one-fourth had access to the internet and a computer, and only 16% had ever used an ATM.



In terms of aspirations, over 60% of youth in the age of 14-18 had aspirations to study beyond grade 12. Professional aspirations varied from military service and police for boys, to nursing and teaching for girls.

## **Policy interventions**

After acknowledging the importance of early childhood education as well secondary education after age 14, the government is considering increasing the coverage of the RTE Act from 6-14 years to 3-16 years. However, as the current and previous ASER reports have demonstrated, merely increasing enrolment will not lead to the development of elementary skills that education is supposed to provide. If anything, the increase in enrolment rates over the last decade has coincided with the fall in the ability of students. Thus, stakeholders must take additional steps to ensure that the quality of education being imparted is not affected.

In that regard, two interesting policy interventions that are in the process of being rolled out hold some promise: same language subtitling (SLS) and outcomes fund for the education sector. Drop-out cases involving 'loss of interest' and 'inadequate funds' are problems that can be innovatively tackled. It is high time India develops its own indigenous Escuela Nueva model for the primary and secondary education space incorporating experiences from various cross-country models.

Conceived by Professor Brij Kothari of IIM Ahmedabad, SLS is the concept of subtitling existing Bollywood film songs on television. Kothari's research estimates a 9% increase in the number of functional readers who watch TV programmes with SLS within a period of two years.

Similarly, a large outcome-based fund for education is all set to launch in India in early 2018. Touted as one of the first and largest funds for social enterprises, the fund would invest in education providers to work with government-run schools to deliver outcomes. There could be a variety of outcomes like early childhood interventions, retention of girl students, learning in primary schools and employability of students after high school. The fund is being launched by the Global Social Impact Investment Steering Group, an organisation comprising 13 member countries (including India), with a focus on channelling global social impact investment. Outcome fund based models are actively being employed by nations across the globe to fund social projects and have the potential to deliver the necessary outcomes.

While the statistics borne out by ASER 2017 do reveal a gamut of concerns regarding our secondary education sector, let's take this as an opportunity to set up our house in order. While we may be gung-ho about increasing GDP growth rates or surpassing major economies by 2030, let's also focus on translating these high numbers to meet the aspirations of India's young and providing them with an education system that is innovative, proactive and prescient and yet deeply invests in foundational skills. The 'dividend' that we enjoy must not end up becoming a recipe for 'disaster'.

*Aniruddha Ghosh is a graduate student who has recently completed his MSc in Econometrics and Mathematical Economics from the London School of Economics. Sujan Bandyopadhyay*

*currently works for CAFRAL, Reserve Bank of India and holds an MSc in Economics from LSE.*