

# From Enrolment to Learning: An Analysis of Reading Skill among Elementary Students of India.

## Abstract

Elementary education is a fundamental right in India. Different government initiatives such as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act-2009, Samagra Shiksha, and the National Education Policy-2020 have contributed in enrolment at the elementary level. However, high enrolment rate has not translated into learning outcomes due to inadequate infrastructure, dearth of quality teachers and post pandemic disruptions. This study is an attempt to explore elementary education with reference to enrolment and reading skills. Based on secondary sources such as the report namely Women and Men in India published by the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation (MoSPI) and ASER, the study focuses on trends in enrolment across gender and reading skills among elementary students over the past decade. Government interventions at elementary level have played a major role in bringing children into schools. However, learning outcomes remain unsatisfactory. Data from ASER (2014-2024) consistently showed that a good number of students enrolled in Std. VIII are unable to read the text of lower primary levels. Finally, the study underscores that educational development in India has entered a new phase where the challenge is no longer limited to ensuring school enrolment but extends to learning outcomes for every child. Although India has made remarkable progress in expanding elementary education, the persistence of low foundational literacy and numeracy indicates a gap between access and achievement.

**Key words:** Reading skills, Reading Literacy, Adjusted Net-Enrolment, Elementary Education

### 1.0. Introduction

The Constitution of India in Article 45 States, “The State shall Endeavor to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years” India’s quest for universal elementary education began more than seven decades ago with this Constitutional mandate. With the objectives

32 to provide free and compulsory elementary education to children between 6-14 years, to increase  
33 enrolment level, decrease the rate of dropout and maximize learning, a number of initiatives have  
34 been taken in the form of policy, programs and constitutional amendments. Few of them are National  
35 Policy on Education, 1968, 42<sup>nd</sup> Constitutional amendment (1976) by which Education has been  
36 added in concurrent list, National Policy on Education (1986), District Primary Education Program  
37 (1994) and many more. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan launched in 2001 and the enactment of the Right  
38 to Education act on April 1, 2010 contributed well as India has achieved strong success in providing  
39 near-universal access to the 6–14-year students, with 85.9 % enrolment in primary school 76.2 % in  
40 upper primary school (ASER, 2024). However, more efforts are needed in qualitative terms as  
41 learning outcomes are opposed to quantitative terms (Pandey, 2019). Studies reported that the  
42 accessibility is not being translated into learning. Despite the high enrolment and attendance rates,  
43 relevant learning outcomes across all levels are low (Pandey, 2018) and student learning outcomes  
44 consistently indicated that universal access has not translated into improved educational quality  
45 (Avvisati, 2017). Shah and Steinberg (2019) reported that learning levels have significantly declined  
46 between 2010 and 2018 and Covid-19 led school closures have increased the learning crisis in India.  
47 Statistics (World Bank, 2019) revealed that 55% of India's school-going children are unable to read  
48 and comprehend a short, age-appropriate text. National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 also highlights  
49 the problem of children's low foundational skills (i.e. reading and math scores) in elementary  
50 education and less participation.

51 The report of PISA (2018) reported that although universalization of education has been  
52 achieved by establishing a number of schools. However, these schools are of unequal quality which  
53 makes it impossible for students from different economic groups to meet and learn together. PISA  
54 results also show that there is a positive relationship between investment in education and average  
55 performance. The government's data suggests that 18.5% of India's schools continue to lack the  
56 necessary minimum professional qualifications and a third of our schools (34.4%) lack the requisite  
57 number of teachers as per the Right to Education Act norms. Attracting the most qualified teachers to  
58 the most challenging classrooms will play a critical role in determining the success of India's  
59 educational success. India needs to do more to restore the dignity of the teaching  
60 profession. Investment in equitable education while addressing regional, gender and social disparities  
61 can correct historic wrongs done to India's poor and socially disadvantaged. The primary objectives  
62 of the study is to explore the enrolment rate and basic reading skill among elementary students.

### 63 **1.1 Reading: A Foundation for All Learning**

64 Reading is an essential activity in our daily life; is a cognitive process which involves decoding  
65 symbols to arrive the meaning. According to Hoover & Gough (1990), reading is decoding and

66 understanding the text. It enhances comprehension, expands vocabulary, and stimulates critical  
67 thinking. Mastering various reading techniques is essential for efficient studying and information  
68 retention. Reading is a fundamental skill that plays a crucial role in personal and academic success.  
69 According to Stainthorp (2021), "A fairly basic definition would be that reading means accessing  
70 language through the eyes rather than through the ears." In formal educational settings, reading is an  
71 essential skill that supports many aspects of learning (Olayinka, 2025). When children start schooling,  
72 one of the first milestones they achieve is foundational skills in reading, such as phonics, vocabulary  
73 and comprehension. Reading is the key to unlocking a world of possibilities for students' future  
74 learning. It opens the door to future learning across subjects such as math, science, and social  
75 science. Reading is the thread that ties learning together. Thus, gradually, reading transits from  
76 "learning to read" to "reading to learn" (Nebraska, 2026). The scenario of reading skill in India is  
77 concerning as an ASER report found that only 23.4% of Standard III students in government schools can  
78 read a Standard II-level text, which reflects that the persistent learning crisis continues to impair  
79 India's 250 million students despite decades of investment in school education. Reading is always  
80 seen as Reading Literacy. According to UNESCO (n.d) Reading Literacy is "An ability to read and  
81 write, with understanding, a short, simple statement relevant to one's everyday life." Similarly, PISA  
82 (2018) defines literacy as "Reading literacy is understanding, using, evaluating, reflecting on and  
83 engaging with texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to  
84 participate in society" According to PIRL's 2021 Assessment Framework, "Reading literacy is the  
85 ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the  
86 individual. Readers can construct meaning from texts in a variety of forms. They read to learn, to  
87 participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment." However, a  
88 distinction between reading and reading literacy. Reading primarily refers to the mechanical process  
89 of decoding symbols and recognizing words whereas reading literacy encompasses word recognition,  
90 comprehension, fluency and motivation. Therefore, reading is vocalizing written while reading  
91 literacy reflects meaningful engagement with the text.

## 92 **1.2 Elementary Stage**

93 The elementary stage is a very important stage in formal education as it lays the foundation for  
94 an individual's overall development and for building a better society, which helps to bring prosperity  
95 in a country as a whole (Kaleem & Akhtar, 2020). According to Shukla & Singh (2022) elementary  
96 education serves as the foundational step in an individual's educational journey, just as one must  
97 learn to walk before they can run. According to RTE act, 2009, elementary education is of eight  
98 years and encompasses primary (I-V) and upper primary (VI-VIII) catering to children between the  
99 ages of six to fourteen. The National Education Policy, 2020 gave the highest priority to the problem

100 of elementary children dropping out of school and will adopt an array of meticulously formulated  
101 strategies based on micro-planning, and apply them at the grass-roots level all over the country.

### 102 **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

103 The following objectives were formulated as per the need of the study:

- 104 • To examine the overall trend in enrolment and gender differentials at the elementary level in  
105 India.
- 106 • To analyze the reading competencies of elementary students in India

### 107 **1.4 Methodology**

108 The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine and explain the  
109 relationship between enrolment trends and reading skills among elementary students in India. The  
110 study is based on the analysis of secondary data gathered from different nationally recognized reports  
111 such as the report titled Women and Men in India released annually by the Ministry of Statistics and  
112 Program Implementation (MoSPI) and Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). The publication  
113 Women and Men in India presents a comprehensive overview of the status of women and men in  
114 India through a compilation of selected indicators across key domains, including population,  
115 education, health, economic participation, decision-making, violence against women, and other  
116 gender-related issues, drawing upon inputs from various Ministries, Departments and organizations  
117 (PIB, 2026). The ASER is nationwide, citizen led household survey published by the NGO Pratham  
118 Foundation on learning outcomes of school students in rural India (PIB, 2024). The report tracks  
119 preschool and school enrolment, assess reading and arithmetic skill at elementary level. Beside these,  
120 relevant national & international publications, policy documents, journal articles, and government  
121 reports related to elementary education and learning outcomes in India has been used. The study  
122 covers data from 2014-2024 to identify trends in enrolment and reading achievement at elementary  
123 level. As the study is based entirely on publicly available secondary data, no direct human  
124 participation was involved. Proper citation and acknowledgment of all data sources and reports have  
125 been ensured during writing of this paper and the details of these have been included in reference  
126 section.

### 127 **1.5 Overall trend in Enrolment with Gender differentials at elementary level**

#### 128 *Primary (I-V) Level*

129 The Adjusted Net Enrolment Ratio also called (ANER), is a refinement Net Enrolment Ratio  
130 (NER) is a critical indicator for measuring progress toward achieving universal school education.  
131 According to Mehta (n.d.) ANER provides a more accurate representation of school enrolment by  
132 accounting for age-specific enrolment rates and adjusting for students outside the official age range

133 for a particular grade. ANER is widely recognised as a more robust measure for assessing educational  
 134 access and equity. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe; UNECE  
 135 (2012), the Net enrolment is the ratio of the number of children of official school age who are enrolled  
 136 in primary education to the total population of children of official School age, expressed as a  
 137 percentage. ANER is calculated by using the following formula:

$$138 \quad A - \text{NER} = \frac{\text{Number of children of official primary school age enrolled in primary or secondary education}}{\text{Population of the same age group}} * 100$$

139 **Table 1: ANER at Primary Level 2014 -2024**

Level	Gender	2014- 15	2015- 16	2016- 17	2017- 18	2018- 19	2019- 20	2020- 21	2021- 22	2022- 23	2023- 24
Primary (I-V)	Boys	90.9	90.2	96.6	96.0	93.6	96.3	97.4	97.6	86.6	84.1
	Girls	93.2	92.9	97.1	96.8	95.0	98.4	99.9	100.0	92.0	88.0
	Total	92.0	91.5	96.8	96.4	94.3	97.3	98.6	99.1	89.1	85.9

140 *Source: MOSPI <https://esankhyiki.mospi.gov.in>*

141 From the table it is clear that a pattern emerges of overall improvement in enrolment between  
 142 2014–15 to 2021–22, followed by a noticeable decline in the subsequent years i.e. 2022–23 and  
 143 2023–24. The total ANER increased steadily from 92.0% (2014–15) to a peak of 99.1% (2021–22),  
 144 indicating near-universal enrolment at the primary level during this period. This image may be due  
 145 the positive impact of policy interventions such as RTE Act-2009 and other initiatives.

146 From a gender perspective, girls consistently show higher enrolment ratio than boys during  
 147 201-15 to 2021-22. For instance, girls' ANER reached 100% in 2021–22, compared to 97.6% for  
 148 boys due to gender-focused educational policies and schemes promoting girls' education. However, a  
 149 sharp decline is observed after 2021–22 with reference to girls' enrolment dropped from 99.1% to  
 150 89.1% in 2022–23 and further to 85.9% in 2023–24. The decline in enrolment ratios during the last  
 151 two years (2022-23 & 2023-24) raised concerns and demand to revisit the policy and schemes.

152 In a nut shell, girls maintained a consistently higher enrolment ratio than boys during 2014-  
 153 2024 and the gender gap remained relatively small in primary education. Further, during 2016–17 to  
 154 2021–22 a strong progress toward universal primary education have seen. However, the decline after  
 155 2021–22 may indicate issues related to school closure during COVID-19 pandemic, educational  
 156 disruptions, demographic adjustments, migration, or changes in data estimation methods.

### 157 ***Upper-primary (VI-VIII) Level***

158 The data of table 2 reveals that in contrast to the primary level, a moderate enrolment with  
 159 greater fluctuations and comparatively lower participation has been reported at the upper primary

160 level. The total ANER at the upper primary level shows an irregular upward trend from 82.5% (2014–  
 161 15) to a peak of 87.3% (2021–22) indicating gradual improvement in access and participation.  
 162 However, this increase is not consistent, as evident from table, it declines (e.g., 78.4% in 2016–17  
 163 and 76.6% in 2018–19). This suggests that retention and transition from primary to upper primary  
 164 remain persistent challenges across all years. This reflects continued progress toward gender equity  
 165 and the effectiveness of initiatives promoting girls' education beyond the primary level. A sharp  
 166 decline in enrolment has been reported after 2021–22, where the total ANER dropped from 87.3% to  
 167 77.8% in 2022–23 and further to 76.2% in 2023–24. The data also reported that India has noticeable  
 168 progress towards enrolment especially at the level of upper primary and girls performed better than  
 169 boys. However, the decline in enrolment for both boys and girls, indicating systemic disruptions  
 170 rather than gender-specific issues. Possible reasons include post-pandemic effects, such as increased  
 171 dropout rates, economic pressures, child labour, and reduced transition rates to higher grades.

172 **Table 2: ANER at Upper Primary Level 2014 -2024**

Level	Gender	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Upper Primary	Boys	79.0	80.3	79.3	80.1	77.6	80.9	84.0	87.0	76.2	74.9
	Girls	84.4	87.1	81.5	81.8	79.4	82.4	84.9	87.5	79.5	77.5
	Total	82.5	83.5	78.4	78.8	76.6	79.6	84.4	87.3	77.8	76.2

173 Source: MOSPI <https://esankhyiki.mospi.gov.in>

#### 174 **Elementary (I-VIII) level**

175 In India, elementary education concludes with the completion of Class VIII, after which  
 176 student's transition to secondary education (IX-XII). From the table 3, it is clear that a positive trend  
 177 at elementary level has been recorded over the study period although fluctuations are recorded. The  
 178 total ANER increased from 91.6% (2014–15) to 96.5% (2021–22), reflecting substantial progress  
 179 toward Universal Elementary Education (UEE) in India. This rising trend may be due to various  
 180 government initiatives for UEE. However, after attainment its peak in 2021–22, the total ANER  
 181 declined sharply to 89.4% (2022–23) and further to 87.2% (2023–24).

Level	Gender	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Elementary (I-VIII)	Boys	89.8	90.0	93.1	92.8	91.4	93.6	95.1	95.6	87.5	85.9
	Girls	93.5	94.2	94.2	93.9	92.8	95.3	96.9	97.5	91.5	88.6
	Total	91.6	91.9	93.6	93.3	92.1	94.4	96.0	96.5	89.4	87.2

**Table 3: ANER at Elementary Level 2014-2024**

Source: MoSPI <https://esankhyiki.mospi.gov.in>

In terms of gender, girls' enrolment is consistently better than boys throughout the entire period. As table indicates that, in 2021–22, girls' ANER touched 97.5% which is slightly higher than boys at 95.6%. This indicates not only the achievement of gender parity but also a slight advantage in favour of girls, highlighting the success of targeted interventions such as scholarships, awareness campaigns, and girl-centric educational schemes. A significant decline has been recorded just after 2021-22 where the total ANER dropped from 96.5.3% in 2021-22 to 87.2% in 2023–24. This downward trend has been noted for both boys and girls, indicating systemic disruptions rather than gender-specific issues.

### 3.0. Reading Skill among Elementary Students in India

While India has achieved notable advancements in overall literacy (98.1%) and has also achieved UEE (ASER, 2024; MoSPI, 2024). This means access is no longer the issue in India, but the quality matters. The documents of ASER during 2010-2024 revealed a troubling trend in reading proficiency levels at elementary. Banerji & Chavan (2016 & 2019) mentioned that quality of early education is still a big challenge particularly at primary level .

**Table 4: Percentage of Children in Std. V who can read Std. II level text (2010-2024)**

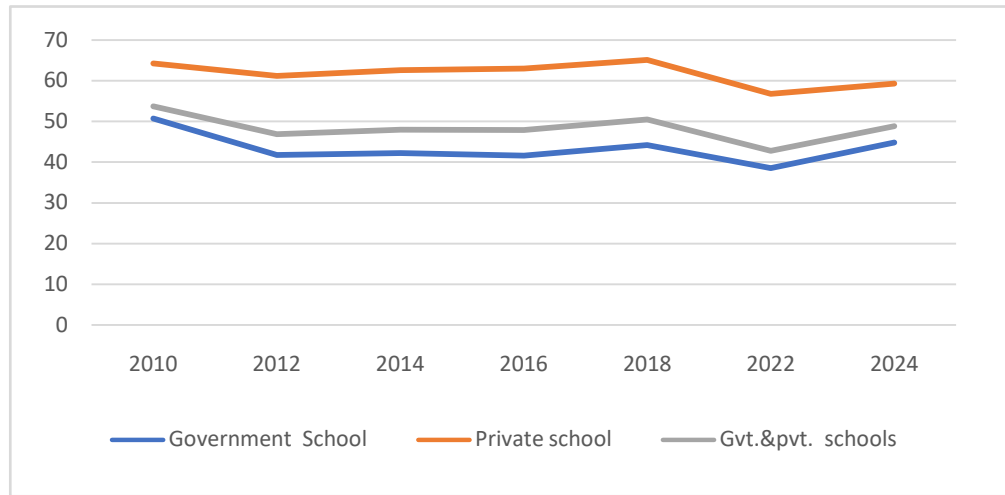
Year	Government School	Private School	Govt. & Private Schools
2010	50.7	64.2	53.7
2012	41.7	61.2	46.9
2014	42.2	62.6	48.0
2016	41.6	63.0	47.9
2018	44.2	65.1	50.5
2022	38.5	56.8	42.8
2024	44.8	59.3	48.8
Average %	43.38	61.7	48.37

Source: ASER <https://asercentre.org/> (2010-2024 )

A survey report of ASER during the years 2016-2024 reported that, despite several years of schooling, a significant number of children fail to acquire essential foundational skills in a timely manner. Only half of all V Std. students are able to read simple texts intended for II Std. students. The table and figure indicates that a large proportion of students are still unable to read basic text. Further, data from 2010 to 2024 indicates a concerning situation. Proficiency in reading has significantly declined, dropping from 50.7 per cent in 2010 to 38.5 per cent in 2022 in government

206 schools and from 64.2 per cent in 2010 to 56.8 per cent in 2022 in Private schools. Overall, the  
 207 combined reading proficiency for both government and private schools fell from 53.7 per cent in  
 208 2010 to 42.8 per cent in 2022; overall, there is a declining trend.

209 **Figure 1:** Percentage of Children in Std. V who can read Std. II level text (2010-2024)



210 *Source:* ASER <https://asercentre.org/> (2010-2024)

211 The most notable decreases occurred between 2010 & 2012 and 2018 & 2022. Between the  
 212 years 2010 and 2012, government schools experienced a decline of 9%, while private schools show a  
 213 decrease of 3%. Overall, its reduction of 6.8%. Similarly, from 2018 to 2022, government schools  
 214 recorded a decline of 5.7% and private schools fell by 8.3%, resulting in an overall decrease of 7.4%,  
 215 reflecting the impact of recent challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey reveals a  
 216 consistent declining trend in both government and private schools from 2010 to 2022. Despite this  
 217 decline, private schools have consistently outperformed government schools. However, there is a  
 218 notable increase observed after 2022. For example, in government schools, reading levels surged by  
 219 44.8 per cent in 2024, up from 38.5 per cent in 2022. Similarly, private schools experienced a rise  
 220 from 56.8 per cent to 59.3 per cent, while the overall increase was from 42.8 to 48.8 per cent. These  
 221 improvements reflect the positive impact of government initiatives and efforts. At the higher stage  
 222 (Std. VIII), reading proficiency is unsatisfactory, as a large proportion of students are unable to read  
 223 the text of Std. II level.

224 Data reveals that in 2010, 82% of students were able in reading of Std.II Level text in  
 225 government schools which dropped significantly to 66.2% in 2022. In private schools, the percentage  
 226 of proficient readers decreased from 87.5% in 2010 to 80.0% in 2022. The sharpest decline can be  
 227 seen between 2010 and 2014. Overall, in Government and Private Schools proficiency level fell from  
 228 83.5 per cent in 2010 to 69.6 per cent in 2022.

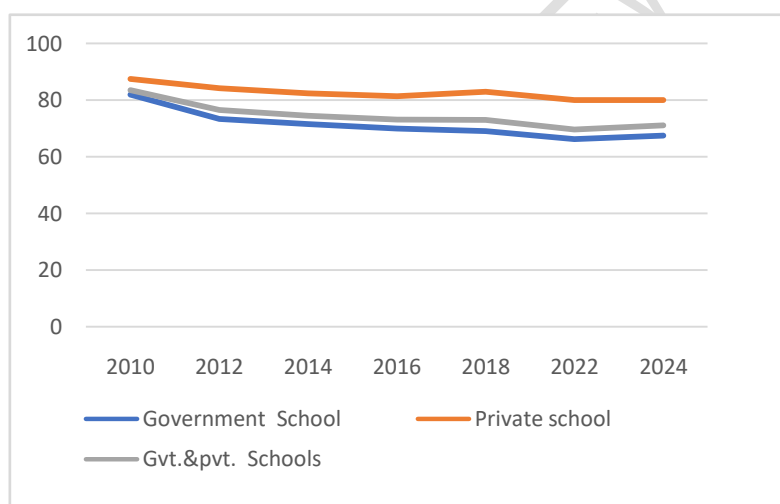
229 **Table 5:** Trends over time of Children in Std. VIII who can read Std. II Level Text

Year	Government School	Private School	Govt. & Private Schools
2010	82.0	87.5	83.5
2012	73.4	84.2	76.5
2014	71.5	82.4	74.5
2016	70.0	81.4	73.1
2018	69.0	82.9	73.0
2022	66.2	80.0	69.6
2024	67.5	80.0	71.1

230 Source: ASER <https://asercentre.org/> (2010-2024)

231 **Figure 2:** Percentage of Children in Std. VIII who can read Std. II level text

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233 Source: ASER <https://asercentre.org/> (2010-2024)

234 The graph clearly illustrates that there is a consistent decline in the reading ability  
 235 percentages across all school types. The combined performance of Govt. & Private Schools shows a  
 236 similar decline, aligning closely with the trend in Government Schools. However, from 2022 to  
 237 2024, there is an upward trend in the per cent age of students who can read Std. II level text

238 **Table 6:** Comparison between ANR and Students who can read Std II level text at different Std.

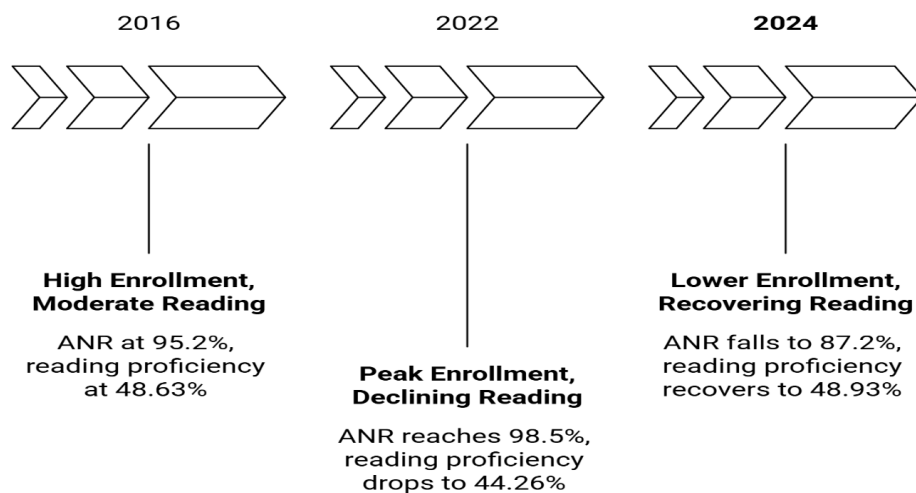
Year	ANR at the Elementary Level	Percentage of Children who can read Std. II level text at different Stds.			Total
		III	V	VIII	
2016	93.6	25.1	47.8	73.0	48.63

2018	92.1	27.2	50.3	72.0	49.83
2022	98.5	20.5	42.8	69.5	44.26
2024	87.2	27.0	48.7	71.1	48.93

239 Source: MoSPI <https://esankhyiki.mospi.gov.in> ASER <https://asercentre.org> 2016- 2024

240 With a peak of 98.5% in 2022, the ANR remains relatively high across all observed years,  
 241 indicating that accessibility in elementary education has substantially improved. But there is a lack  
 242 of correspondence between the improvement in enrolment and the improvement in reading  
 243 competencies. It is evident from the above table that despite the highest ANR recorded in 2022, the  
 244 reading ability across all grade levels (III: 20.5%, V: 42.8%, VIII: 69.5%) shows a marked decline  
 245 compared to previous years. This indicates that greater participation in schooling does not  
 246 necessarily lead to corresponding improvements in reading literacy skills. However, as grades  
 247 increase, the learning gradient improves with reading proficiency, but overall learning percentages  
 248 remain suboptimal

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**Figure 3** Trend in ANER and Reading Literacy at Elementary Education

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At the primary level (Std. III), only one-third of students shows the ability to read a Std. II-level text in most of the years, expected to be proficient by the completion of std. III as per the National Education Policy, 2020. This raises concerns about the effectiveness of early grade instruction and the acquisition of foundational literacy skills. The fluctuation in total reading percentages from 48.63% (2016) to 44.26% (2022) and a slight recovery to 48.93% (2024) shows that stagnation rather than sustained improvement in learning outcomes over time. The decline observed in 2022 may also be due to interrupted schooling, possibly due to COVID-19 pandemic. The data of 2024 shows a trivial recovery in reading skills across all grades, despite a noticeable decline in ANR to

259 87.2%. This inverse pattern suggests that factors like quality of instruction, learning recovery  
260 programs etc. play a vital role in influencing student learning outcomes.

## 261 **Conclusion**

262 Elementary education is one of the most important catalysts for social and economic progress  
263 of a nation. The development of a child into a democratic citizen is dependent on the quality of  
264 elementary education. Quality elementary education expands the scope of an individual's  
265 development, especially in terms of acquisition of skills and employability; leading to enhancement  
266 of her/his efficiency and overall quality of life. Further, elementary education is very important for  
267 our country because only a literate population can actively contribute to nation-building through  
268 rational thinking and reinforcement of democratic values. India has made considerable progress  
269 toward UEE by 2021–22 with gender equity in enrolment. However, the fluctuations in enrolment  
270 ratios over the years is alarming. Despite notable progress in enrolment and gender parity at primary  
271 and upper primary level, quality learning is still a big challenge. The ASER suggests that a  
272 considerable number of elementary students are still unable to read Std. II-level text. The findings of  
273 the study highlighted that focus on foundational skill especially reading skill is a dire need of hour.  
274 Hence, urgent shift from quantitative (enrolment) to qualitative (foundational literacy and numeracy)  
275 at the early stages of schooling is needed. The study reveals that a determined and gradual decline in  
276 reading skill over the years in both government and private schools, despite the fact that private  
277 schools steadily outperformed government schools in all years. Private schools have a higher  
278 percentage of proficient readers than government schools, with a gap of approximately 13.8% in  
279 2022. One possible contributing factor is that government schools may lack adequate physical and  
280 human resources as compared to private schools. Gouda (2013) argued that private primary schools  
281 perform better with reference to physical infrastructure and schooling costs to government primary  
282 schools in India.

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