

NIPUN Bharat's Deadline Year Has Arrived: What the FLN Data Actually Shows

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NIPUN Bharat's 2026-27 deadline has arrived. ASER 2024 and UDISE+ data show how far India's Grade 3 reading & maths outcomes still fall short

Key Takeaways

- NIPUN Bharat is the government's mission to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) by the end of Grade 3. NEP 2020 set the policy goal of universal FLN by 2025, while NIPUN Bharat's implementation timeline extends to 2026-27.
- In 2024, 23.4% of Grade 3 government school children could read a Grade 2-level text, the highest figure since ASER began tracking this in 2005, but still short of the halfway mark.
- State gaps exceed 40 percentage points: Himachal Pradesh recorded 49.7% in 2024, Jammu & Kashmir recorded 6.7%.
- Uttar Pradesh's Grade 3 reading score rose from 16.4% to 27.9% between 2022 and 2024, one of the sharpest two-year gains in the country.
- Two-thirds of Grade 1 and Grade 2 government school classrooms are multigrade, a reality NIPUN Bharat's activities weren't originally built for.

What NIPUN Bharat Promises, and by When

NIPUN stands for the *National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy*. It is the government's national mission for **foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN)**, launched under Samagra Shiksha.[1]

The mission covers children aged 3 to 9, from Balvatika through Grade 3. **Its goal is to ensure that every child can read with understanding and do basic arithmetic by the end of Grade 3.** To deliver this, the government set up teams at five levels: national, state, district, block, and school. [1]

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 called foundational literacy and numeracy the base on which everything else in the policy depends, and set 2025 as the year to reach it for every child.[2] NIPUN Bharat launched in July 2021 to carry that out, but gave itself a later working deadline, 2026-27, with an earlier checkpoint at Grade 2 level.[3]

NEP 2020's 2025 target has already passed. This article focuses on the current NIPUN Bharat deadline of 2026-27.

For organisations that plan or fund FLN programmes in government schools, the old target no longer matters. What matters is what the latest data says about the new one.

Did India Hit the 2025 Target?

No. The data shows India is still far from universal FLN.

In 2024, the most recent year with usable national data, 23.4% of Grade 3 children in government schools could read a Grade 2-level text.[4]

Across government and private schools combined, the same reading measure was 27.1%.[4] Even under a looser standard that counts children who can read at Grade 1 level or higher, the figure rises to roughly 47%, still well below universal proficiency.[4] However, NIPUN Bharat's target is 100%. And on both the strict reading benchmark and the more generous one, the country falls well short.

Arithmetic shows the same pattern[4]:

- In 2024, 27.6% of Grade 3 government school children could do subtraction, a basic Grade 2-level skill.
- Only 11.4% could divide, a Grade 3 or 4-level skill.
- And 5.5% could not yet recognise single-digit numbers, something normally expected by the end of Grade 1.

None of this shortfall is a judgment on the mission's design. NIPUN Bharat has done more than any earlier Indian education programme to focus schools on the basics of reading and maths. But getting every child in a system this large, *14.71 lakh schools, 1.01 crore teachers, 24.69 crore students*, to hit one target, while still recovering from pandemic-era learning loss, **was always going to be hard on the original timeline.** The 2026-27 deadline carries the same difficulty, with less runway left before that deadline than the mission had when it launched in 2021.

(Note: ASER runs a survey every two years, so 2024 is still the latest full round; the next one is underway in late 2026, with results due in early 2027.)

How Far Reading and Maths Scores Have Recovered

Here is how that shortfall looks set against the last decade. Grade 3 reading levels in government schools fell to a pandemic-low of 16.3% in 2022. By 2024, they had climbed to 23.4%, above even the pre-pandemic 2018 level of 20.9%. That is the highest figure recorded for this measure since ASER started tracking it in 2005.[4]

The numbers below show the recovery and how far it still has to go:

Grade 3 reading at Grade 2 level ("Std III" and "Std II" in ASER's own terms), All-India, rural. Source: ASER 2024, via Education For All in India's analysis of NIPUN Bharat outcomes[4]

Maths tells a similar story. The share of Grade 3 government school children **who could do subtraction rose from 20.2% in 2022 to 27.6% in 2024**, the sharpest two-year gain ASER has recorded for this skill.[4]

But if we look closer at what Grade 3 children can do, the recovery looks less complete. In 2024, 8.2% of Grade 3 children could not read even a single letter, and another 22.6% could read letters but nothing more.[4] That means close to a third of all Grade 3 children are reading below Grade 1 level, in classrooms where the syllabus assumes they've already moved past that stage.

State-Wise Analysis

The recovery we discussed above is a national average, which usually doesn't say much about the range underneath it. That range matters more than the headline number.

Which States Lead

Uttar Pradesh shows the standout turnaround. Its **Grade 3 government school reading score** moved from[4] 16.4% in 2022 to 27.9% in 2024, an 11.5 percentage point jump in the last two years alone. School attendance in the state, stuck below 60% for over a decade, rose to 71.4% over the same period.[4] For a state of 22 crore people with a long history of weak learning outcomes, that pace is unusual.

Himachal Pradesh has the highest score of any state: **49.7% of its Grade 3 government school children read at benchmark level in 2024**. That is a recovery from a pandemic dip to 23.0% in 2022, and it beats the state's own 2018 peak of 47.4%.[4]

Which States Lag

At the other end, three states remain in a very low-performing band: **Telangana** (6.8%), **Jammu & Kashmir** (6.7%), and **Arunachal Pradesh** (7.2%). Fewer than 1 in 14 Grade 3 government school children in these states read at the level expected of them.[4] Telangana is the most concerning of the three: its score has barely moved since 2022, despite the state's relative wealth.[4]

One pattern stands out on its own. Several southern states perform well on education indicators; **Tamil Nadu** (13.2%), **Karnataka** (15.4%), **Andhra Pradesh** (14.7%), and **Telangana** (6.8%) *are scoring below Uttar Pradesh on Grade 3 reading in this dataset*. [4] **Kerala**, despite strong school infrastructure, has also stalled rather than improved, moving from 43.4% in 2018 to 44.4% in 2024 after a pandemic dip.[4] **Rajasthan** too sits in the same lower band at 12.1%, still short of the 15% mark.

Why states with stronger systems are lagging here is not something the data explains by itself. It's a question worth asking rather than one to assume an answer to.

Why Multigrade Classrooms Undercut the Mission's Design

NIPUN Bharat's classroom activities assume one teacher, one grade, and a set of tasks built for that single grade.[4] UDISE+ 2024-25 data shows that the assumption does not hold for many government schools.

52.1% of government primary schools had fewer than 60 students enrolled in 2024-25, up from 44% in 2022.[4] In **Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Nagaland, and Karnataka**, over 80% of primary schools are this small.[4] Small schools mean fewer teachers for the same number of grades, and that usually means multigrade classrooms. Two-thirds of Grade 1 and Grade 2 classrooms had children from more than one grade sitting together in 2024. [4]

This mismatch is worth stating plainly. **Activities designed for a single grade are harder to use in multigrade classrooms, where one teacher may be handling pre-primary through Grade 3 children at the same time**. The pupil-teacher ratio makes this harder still: topping 35:1 in several large states against the RTE norm of 30:1.[4]

Why Government Schools Are Recovering Faster Than

Private Ones

The classroom isn't the only place where the numbers surprise. School type does too, and in the opposite direction most people would expect. Government schools, not private ones, are leading the recovery.

Between 2022 and 2024, government schools gained far more ground than private ones on Grade 3 reading:

Private school reading levels in 2024 are still below their pre-pandemic 2018 figure, while government schools have already passed theirs.[4]

Maths shows the same gap: government schools gained 7.4 percentage points on subtraction between 2022 and 2024, against 4.4 points in private schools (43.1% to 47.5%).[4]

The likely reason is a clear, **sustained government push**. Over 80% of government schools visited for ASER 2024 had received official instructions to run FLN activities. Most had at least one FLN-trained teacher, and nearly all had distributed textbooks to every grade.[4]

Private schools teach close to a third of rural children and have usually outperformed government schools. Their slower recovery is worth flagging directly: it isn't clear how far NIPUN Bharat's push has reached into their classrooms at all. [4]

Three Gaps That Stand Between Now and 2027

Put together, the multigrade mismatch, the state-targeting gap, and the private-school gap all point in the same direction. None of this argues against how NIPUN Bharat was designed. It means the **mission is operating in classrooms and school systems that are far more varied than a single national model** can assume.

Reaching universal FLN by 2026-27 from a 2024 base of 23.4% would need progress far faster than anything seen so far.[4] For organisations planning or funding FLN work, that distance breaks down into three specific gaps:

- **A multigrade gap.** FLN materials and teacher training built for one grade at a time need to work for classrooms where two or more grades share a teacher and a room, since that is now common rather than rare in several states.
- **A state-targeting gap.** States below 15% on Grade 3 reading, including Telangana, Jammu & Kashmir, Arunachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Rajasthan, need plans built for where they stand, not one plan for the whole country.
- **A private-school gap.** Nearly a third of rural children go to private schools, and these schools seem to be recovering more slowly, with less of the structured FLN push that government schools have had.

A plan built for Himachal Pradesh's near-universal FLN push won't be the right starting point for Jammu & Kashmir. Each gap needs to be identified before a solution is designed, not after.

Conclusion

NIPUN Bharat's 2026-27 deadline is now here. The data shows India has made real progress since 2022, but it is still far from universal FLN.

Government schools have recovered from pandemic-era learning loss faster than private ones.

Some states have made rapid progress, and a real national push behind foundational learning now exists where none did before 2021.

Even so, 76.6% of Grade 3 children in government schools still cannot read a Grade 2-level text. The gap between states, from Himachal Pradesh's 49.7% to Jammu & Kashmir's 6.7%, shows a **country moving at several different speeds toward the same deadline**. Closing that gap needs support built for that variation, not one plan applied everywhere the same way.

iDream Education partners with state education departments and CSR programmes on structured, competency-based foundational learning support. That includes classrooms where multigrade teaching, not one grade with one teacher, is the everyday reality.

Sources

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