Beyond the Exam: Competency-Based Learning in Indian Schools

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In short. Indian schools can move beyond exam preparation by teaching core knowledge explicitly and assessing whether pupils can explain, apply and revise it in unfamiliar situations. The National Education Policy 2020 gives this shift a policy basis, while classroom routines, accessible tasks and teacher support determine whether it reaches pupils.

Why examinations still shape the classroom

A long history of selection and reform

Written examinations provide a common basis for making decisions when many pupils seek progression through the same system. They can also offer a transparent record of achievement. The design problem arises when the easiest way to do well is to repeat a familiar answer. If scores control progression and families can see them more readily than examples of pupils' work, teachers and pupils have a reason to devote substantial time to rehearsing likely questions. A reform that leaves those incentives intact will depend on unusually committed teachers to sustain new routines.

Modern Indian schooling developed through multiple institutional changes. Colonial education policy, including Macaulay's 1835 minute advocating English-medium instruction for the education it sought to support, formed part of that history. Independent India's university, secondary and education commissions led by Radhakrishnan, Mudaliar and Kothari examined different parts of the system. Post-independence national policies broadened the reform agenda to include access and quality. The relevance of that history for school leaders is that curriculum, selection and teacher preparation evolve at different speeds. An examination reform needs a classroom plan and a progression policy as well as revised test papers.

Keep a common standard and change the evidence

An assessment blueprint can specify what pupils should recall, what they should explain, and what they should do with unfamiliar material. In history, a pupil might recall the date of an event, then use two documents to explain a disagreement about its causes. In mathematics, a pupil may need to identify the right operation before doing the calculation. The second task in each pair still depends on the knowledge tested by the first. This makes it possible to preserve common expectations while changing the balance of evidence on which decisions depend.

Put NEP 2020 into lessons and assessments

Give each stage a workable progression

NEP 2020 describes a 5+3+3+4 curricular structure that brings early childhood education into the first stage. Its priorities include foundational literacy and numeracy, experiential learning, fewer rigid subject boundaries and assessment of competencies. NIPUN Bharat focuses on foundational learning. Vidya Pravesh supports the transition into Grade 1, and Jadui Pitara provides play-based materials for foundational-stage learning. Schools can use these initiatives

to agree what pupils should be able to do before a task becomes more complex.

For example, a teacher who asks children to compare quantities can begin with familiar objects and oral explanations. Pupils then represent the comparison on paper and apply the idea to a different set of objects. A short exit task can distinguish pupils who understand the comparison from pupils who repeat a phrase without relating it to quantities. For children still developing the language of instruction, pointing, speaking in a familiar language where appropriate and working with objects can provide evidence that a written response alone would miss.

Use progress cards to plan the next lesson

PARAKH, the national assessment centre within NCERT, publishes stage-specific Holistic Progress Card materials. A school can start by choosing one competency, writing a short task and agreeing what evidence would show emerging, developing and secure performance. Teachers can then compare two anonymised responses to calibrate their judgements. They should record enough to decide what to reteach and when to check again. A long form filled in at the end of term gives teachers little opportunity to act on a difficulty discovered in September.

Build inquiry on taught knowledge

Try a political science lesson with competing explanations

Consider a lesson on the changing international order. Introduce the Cold War, the subsequent prominence of the United States, China's rise and the role of multilateral institutions. Give pupils a timeline and establish the meaning of national interest, balance of power and strategic autonomy. A question such as whether economic interdependence changes the prospects of rivalry then gives pupils a reason to use these concepts. Groups can make an initial claim, explain the mechanism they think matters and identify evidence that would weaken their explanation.

A second task can ask why India might maintain relationships with Russia and the United States while managing strategic competition and economic links with China. Supply a small packet containing a dated official statement and a short extract from a multilateral source. Ask each group to note who produced each source, what the source actually shows, and which inference remains uncertain. End with an individual response that explains one policy choice and considers an alternative. The individual task shows whether each pupil can use the concept after the discussion.

Make source checking visible

A search result, video or AI response may give a pupil vocabulary and leads. Ask pupils to trace one claim to an identifiable source, check its date and compare it with a second account. They should explain why the evidence is relevant and what it leaves unanswered. Keep the source packet available on paper so pupils can complete the intellectual work during school hours. If devices are available, let groups test a claim online after completing the same first pass as their classmates.

Teachers can make the process manageable by using a two-column record for a claim and its supporting evidence. Ask pupils to correct one claim after feedback and explain the correction in one sentence. At home, families can ask children to explain one thing they understood differently after the lesson, or to show how they solved a small household measurement problem. These conversations give children a reason to articulate their thinking and require little equipment.

Measure improvement without creating a second exam system

Use different evidence for different decisions

A classroom task guides the next lesson. A school-level sample can reveal patterns across classes, while a system survey can help target support. ASER's rural household assessment asks children to demonstrate basic reading and arithmetic, giving a view of foundational skills that enrolment records cannot supply. Its sampling and tasks have a defined purpose. School leaders should avoid treating a rural survey estimate as an individual diagnosis or assuming it describes urban schools equally well.

For a six-week trial, agree one baseline prompt and a later prompt of similar difficulty. Keep a small sample of work from both rounds and discuss cases where pupils improve their scores but still struggle to explain their answers. Compare participation and performance by relevant groups where records permit, while protecting small groups from identification. If many pupils struggle with one prompt, review whether its language, content or presentation tested something outside the intended competency.

Give teachers time to practise judgement

Teachers need examples of good prompts, time to design a lesson and feedback on how it went. Start with a grade team and a single unit. Have one teacher model the task while a colleague records which pupils participate and what errors recur. At the next planning meeting, use the evidence to revise the task and prepare a short follow-up lesson. A shared folder containing the task, an anonymised response and the teacher's adaptation is a concrete resource for the next class.

Training should connect with the examinations pupils still face. Teachers can use published question formats to map which concepts a board paper is likely to cover, then include one application task for each concept. This approach lets pupils practise pacing and written responses while making room for feedback and discussion. School leaders can protect planning time by asking for a representative sample of work instead of requiring detailed portfolios for every lesson.

What ministries, public agencies and donor-funded projects can do

Coordinate materials, examinations and implementation support

Education departments can choose a small set of competencies by stage, produce accessible sample tasks and test their interpretation with teachers before using them more widely. Examination bodies can publish sample items and scoring notes early enough for schools to plan. Teacher educators can incorporate moderation into existing cluster meetings. A district team can then investigate where pupils struggle and distinguish a materials problem from a need for coaching, translation or accessible formats.

India's World Bank-supported Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States project offers an institutional example of linking learning assessment, service delivery and state-level implementation. Project designers can use a similar division of responsibilities in new work. Set a named owner for tasks and exemplars, an owner for teacher coaching and an owner for independent monitoring. Include feedback from rural and multilingual schools during design, when changes are still inexpensive.

Fund and verify work schools can sustain

A project can fund task development, piloting, coaching and monitoring as related activities, each with a concrete deliverable. Specify that an exemplar pack includes accessibility adaptations and scored pupil responses. Ask a district supervisor to verify that the materials reached schools and were used in a lesson. For outcome reporting, use equivalent baseline and follow-up tasks, note changes in participation and budget for independent checks on scoring.

An implementation unit can use a training needs assessment to match support to gaps in task design, feedback or moderation. An institutional capacity assessment can establish which level of the system owns updates and who will fund coaching when a grant ends. Give a school head enough discretion to adjust the timetable while keeping common learning expectations and a workable reporting routine.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is competency-based assessment?

It checks whether a pupil can use taught knowledge to complete a task, explain a decision or solve a related problem.

Does competency-based learning require schools to drop exams?

Schools can retain written exams and include questions that require explanation, application and evaluation alongside recall.

How can a teacher start with a large class?

Teach a common concept, use a short group task and collect one brief individual response from each pupil to guide feedback.

How should schools use digital or AI tools?

Ask pupils to verify specific claims against identifiable sources and provide a paper-based route to the same task.

How can a district monitor progress?

Use comparable tasks, moderate samples of work and investigate changes in participation alongside score differences.

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