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DECLINING ENROLMENT IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS: AN ANALYSIS OF CAUSES AND EMERGING TRENDS

Boddukolu Koteswara Rao
School Assistant (Physics), Zilla Parishad High School (ZPHS), Ramannapeta
Chandarlapadu Mandal, NTR District, Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract

Government schools play a vital role in ensuring equitable access to education, particularly for children from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the declining enrolment of students in government schools has emerged as a significant concern in the Indian education system. This trend raises questions about public confidence in government schooling, educational accessibility and the quality of school education. The present paper examines the emerging trends in student enrolment in government schools in India and analyses the major factors contributing to this decline. It focuses on factors such as parental preference for private schools, perceived differences in educational quality, inadequate infrastructure, teacher availability, learning outcomes, socioeconomic conditions and changing educational aspirations. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach based on secondary data drawn from UDISE+ reports, government publications, educational policy documents and relevant research studies. It also examines the implications of declining enrolment for educational equity, public investment, school infrastructure and the sustainability of the government school system. The paper highlights the need for strengthening public schooling through improved infrastructure, effective teaching practices, teacher accountability, quality assurance and community participation. It argues that restoring public confidence in government schools requires comprehensive institutional improvements and context-specific policy interventions. The study concludes that strengthening government schools is essential for achieving equitable, inclusive and quality education in India.

Keywords: *Government Schools, Student Enrolment, Declining Enrolment, Private Schooling, Educational Equity, School Education, Policy Implications.*

Introduction

Government schools play a vital role in India's education system by providing accessible and affordable education to children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly rural communities and disadvantaged groups. They contribute to educational equity, social inclusion

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and the achievement of universal school education. However, declining enrolment in government schools has become a growing concern, raising questions about parental school choices, the quality of educational provision and the future of public schooling. Several factors may influence enrolment patterns, including parental preferences for private schools, perceptions of teaching quality, school infrastructure, availability of learning resources, socioeconomic conditions, migration and demographic changes. The influence of these factors may vary across regions and educational stages. Therefore, declining enrolment cannot be attributed to a single cause or interpreted solely as a shift towards private schools. A meaningful understanding requires examining changes in the school-age population alongside the institutional and social circumstances that shape enrolment decisions. The issue has wider implications for educational equity, access to schooling, teacher deployment and the effective utilisation of public resources. Although official statistics indicate changes in student enrolment, numerical trends alone cannot adequately explain the factors underlying these changes or their consequences for schools and communities. The central research problem, therefore, is the need for an integrated understanding of enrolment trends, their contributing factors and their implications for the accessibility and sustainability of government schooling. Examining these dimensions together can help distinguish demographic changes from shifts in school preferences and identify contextually appropriate policy responses. In the context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasises equitable access, inclusive education and quality learning opportunities, addressing declining enrolment is important for strengthening public education. Against this background, the present paper examines trends in government school enrolment in India, analyses the major factors associated with its decline, discusses its educational and social implications, and proposes policy measures to strengthen government schools, improve student retention and sustain public confidence in public education.

Objectives of the Study

The present paper aims to:

- Examine trends in government school enrolment in India.
- Identify the major factors associated with declining enrolment in government schools.
- Analyse the educational and social implications of declining enrolment.
- Suggest policy measures to strengthen government schools, improve student retention and ensure equitable access to quality education.

Methodology

The present paper adopts a descriptive and analytical approach based on secondary data. Information is drawn from the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) reports published by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, along with relevant government publications, educational policy documents and research literature. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is used as a key policy reference for examining educational access, equity and quality. The collected information is analysed to examine government school enrolment trends, identify factors associated with declining enrolment and discuss their educational and social implications. The analysis also considers parental preferences, school infrastructure, educational

quality, socioeconomic conditions, demographic changes and school accessibility. Based on these findings, the paper proposes policy measures to strengthen government schools and improve student participation. As the study relies on secondary sources, its conclusions are limited to the information available in the reviewed documents and do not establish causal relationships through primary empirical investigation.

TRENDS IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOL ENROLMENT

Enrolment trends provide important insights into the changing position of government schools within India's education system. Although government schools remain essential for equitable access to education, changes in student numbers raise concerns about educational participation, school choice and student retention. Examining enrolment across educational stages and management categories helps identify the scale of these changes and their implications for public schooling.

Enrolment Patterns Across School Levels

According to the Ministry of Education's UDISE+ 2024–25 data, India recorded approximately 24.69 crore students from the foundational to secondary stages of school education. Enrolment was distributed across the four stages, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Stage-wise Enrolment in School Education in India, 2024–25

School Stage	Enrolment (crore)	Percentage
Foundational	5.23	21.2
Preparatory	6.61	26.8
Middle	6.37	25.8
Secondary	6.48	26.2
Total	24.69	100.0

Source: Ministry of Education, Government of India, UDISE+ 2024–25.

The figures indicate differences in enrolment across educational stages. However, these differences alone cannot establish the extent of dropout or identify where students discontinue their education. Variations in the size of school-age population groups, student progression and retention may also influence enrolment at successive stages. Therefore, enrolment data should be interpreted alongside transition rates, retention rates and dropout indicators to develop a more comprehensive understanding of educational participation.

Changes in Enrolment by School Management

The distribution of students across different school-management categories has changed over the past decade. NITI Aayog's analysis of UDISE data shows that overall school enrolment declined from 26.95 crore in 2014–15 to 24.69 crore in 2024–25. Over the same period, government-school enrolment decreased from approximately 14.66 crore to 12.16 crore, whereas enrolment in private unaided recognised schools increased from approximately 8.56 crore to 9.59 crore.

Table 2. Enrolment by School Management in India, 2014–15 and 2024–25

School management	2014–15 Enrolment (crore)	2024–25 Enrolment (crore)	2024–25 share (%)
Government schools	14.66	12.16	49.25
Government-aided schools	3.05	2.48	10.01
Private unaided recognised schools	8.56	9.59	38.83
Other schools	0.66	0.47	1.91
Total	26.95	24.69	100.00

Source: Ministry of Education, UDISE+ 2024–25; NITI Aayog (2026).

The data indicate a decline in government-school enrolment alongside an increase in private unaided school enrolment. In 2024–25, government schools accounted for 49.25% of total enrolment, compared with 38.83% in private unaided recognised schools. Government-aided and other schools accounted for the remaining shares. These figures show that government schools continue to serve a substantial proportion of school students, despite changes in enrolment patterns. It is important to distinguish changes in absolute enrolment numbers from changes in enrolment shares. The decline in government-school enrolment may be associated with demographic changes, migration, school consolidation, student retention and parental school preferences. Perceptions of teaching quality, English-medium instruction, infrastructure and academic support may also influence school choice. However, enrolment statistics alone cannot establish the extent to which each factor contributes to these changes. Long-term comparisons also require methodological caution. UDISE+ introduced individual student-wise data collection nationally in 2022–23, enabling more detailed student tracking. Differences in data-collection methods should therefore be considered when interpreting trends across reporting periods. Overall, the data highlight a decline in total school enrolment in recent years and a reduction in government-school enrolment over the decade. These trends underline the need to examine demographic factors, parental preferences, school infrastructure, educational quality and student retention. Understanding these factors can help identify appropriate measures to strengthen government schools, improve educational participation and sustain public confidence in public education.

MAJOR CAUSES OF DECLINING ENROLMENT

Declining enrolment in government schools is a multidimensional issue influenced by parental preferences, perceived educational quality, infrastructure, socioeconomic circumstances, demographic changes, school accessibility and institutional management. These factors interact differently across regions and educational stages. NITI Aayog (2026) highlights demographic shifts, changing perceptions of government schools, infrastructure gaps, school consolidation and student-retention challenges as relevant considerations in understanding enrolment trends.

Parental Preferences for Private Schools

Some parents prefer private schools because they associate them with English-medium instruction, academic supervision, discipline, individual attention and better future opportunities. Parental aspirations, institutional reputation and family experiences may influence school choice even when government schools provide education without tuition fees. However, preference for private schools does not necessarily establish superior educational outcomes, as quality varies across both sectors (NITI Aayog, 2026).

Perceived Educational Quality

Parents may consider teacher availability, regular classroom instruction, learning outcomes, assessment practices and academic support when selecting a school. Teacher shortages, multigrade teaching and limited individual attention, where they occur, may weaken confidence in government schools. Strengthening classroom instruction, foundational literacy and numeracy, teacher support and continuous assessment is important for improving learning and public confidence (NITI Aayog, 2026).

School Infrastructure and Learning Resources

Functional classrooms, safe drinking water, usable toilets, electricity, libraries, laboratories, playgrounds and digital facilities support effective teaching and student participation. Inadequate or poorly maintained facilities may affect the learning environment and parental confidence. Access to appropriate sanitation, particularly for adolescent girls, and adequate learning resources is also important for attendance and retention. Improving these facilities can help create safe, inclusive and supportive schools (Ministry of Education, 2025; NITI Aayog, 2026).

Socioeconomic and Demographic Factors

Declining fertility rates can reduce the school-age population and overall enrolment independently of school quality. Poverty, seasonal migration, household responsibilities and the need to contribute to family livelihoods may also interrupt schooling. Indirect educational expenses, social pressures and early marriage can create additional barriers at higher educational stages, particularly for disadvantaged girls. These factors demonstrate why declining enrolment cannot be attributed solely to parental preference for private schools (NITI Aayog, 2026).

School Accessibility and Consolidation

School location and travel distance influence educational participation, particularly in rural and remote areas. Limited access to secondary schools, inadequate transport and safety concerns may discourage attendance and progression to higher grades. Although school consolidation can improve resource utilisation, poorly planned mergers may increase travel distances and disadvantage younger children, girls and students with disabilities. School rationalisation should therefore balance administrative efficiency with safe, equitable access to education (NITI Aayog, 2026).

School Management and Institutional Functioning

Effective school management supports regular attendance, instructional quality and parental confidence. Teacher shortages, single-teacher schools, multigrade classrooms,

administrative burdens and weak academic leadership can constrain educational provision. NITI Aayog (2026) reports that UDISE+ 2024–25 recorded 1,04,125 single-teacher schools in India. Inadequate communication with parents, limited community participation and insufficient follow-up on irregular attendance may further weaken student engagement. Better teacher deployment, school leadership, community participation and monitoring can help address these challenges.

Medium of Instruction and Language Preferences

The medium of instruction can influence parental decisions regarding school selection. Many parents perceive English-medium education as providing better opportunities for higher education, employment and social mobility. Consequently, some families may prefer private schools offering English-medium instruction over government schools, particularly where the latter primarily provide education in regional languages. Differences in language preferences and the availability of English-medium options may therefore influence enrolment patterns. Government schools need to strengthen multilingual education while improving English-language teaching without compromising children's foundational learning.

Student Retention and Transition between Educational Stages

Student retention and transition between educational stages are important factors influencing enrolment in government schools. Student dropouts, irregular attendance and discontinuation of education during the transition from primary to upper-primary and secondary levels can contribute to declining enrolment. Academic difficulties, family circumstances, limited access to higher-level schooling and inadequate student support may affect educational continuity. Furthermore, the transfer of students from government to private schools can further reduce enrolment in the government sector. Strengthening student retention mechanisms, transition support, remedial instruction, counselling and systematic monitoring is essential to improve enrolment continuity in government schools.

Educational and Social Implications

Declining enrolment in government schools has implications beyond a reduction in student numbers. It can affect educational equity, the viability of individual schools, the distribution of teachers and infrastructure, and the relationship between public institutions and local communities. The consequences, however, depend on the underlying causes, geographical context and policy responses. India's recent school education analysis highlights the importance of balancing access, equity, inclusion and resource efficiency while responding to demographic and enrolment changes (NITI Aayog, 2026).

Equity and Inclusion

Government schools play a vital role in providing educational opportunities to children from economically disadvantaged households, rural communities and socially marginalised groups. When enrolment declines and schools are merged or closed without adequate alternatives, children may face longer travel distances, higher transportation costs and difficulties accessing education. These barriers can disproportionately affect girls, children with disabilities, children from low-income families and those living in remote or tribal areas. Consequently, poorly planned school consolidation may weaken equitable access and increase the risk of educational exclusion.

Declining enrolment may also reflect differences in parental preferences and access to educational alternatives. When families with greater financial resources move towards private schooling, government schools may increasingly serve communities with fewer educational choices. This can contribute to the concentration of disadvantage and reinforce inequalities in educational opportunities. Nevertheless, declining enrolment alone does not establish that inequality has increased. Policymakers must examine enrolment alongside attendance, transition, retention and learning outcomes across socioeconomic and social groups. Ensuring accessible neighbourhood schools, inclusive facilities and adequate academic support is essential for protecting educational equity.

School Viability and Educational Continuity

Low enrolment can create operational challenges for government schools, particularly in rural and sparsely populated areas. Schools with very few students may find it difficult to organise age-appropriate classes, provide a broad range of subjects, facilitate peer interaction and maintain a balanced teaching workforce. In some cases, teachers may have to teach multiple grades simultaneously, placing additional demands on classroom planning and instructional time. Persistent low enrolment can also raise questions about the long-term viability of individual schools and encourage administrative consolidation.

School consolidation may offer benefits when it enables students to access better-equipped institutions, subject-specialist teachers, libraries and laboratories. However, these advantages are not automatic. Merging schools without considering distance, transport, safety, disability access and local circumstances may disrupt educational continuity. Research on school consolidation in Rajasthan found that its effects varied across outcomes, demonstrating the importance of evaluating consolidation in its specific context rather than assuming that it is always beneficial or harmful (Varghese, 2022). Therefore, decisions about school closure, merger or restructuring should be based on a comprehensive assessment of enrolment projections, educational quality, geographical accessibility and community needs. Where consolidation is necessary, safe transportation, adequate staffing and uninterrupted access to education should be ensured.

Resource Allocation and Utilization

Changes in enrolment influence how governments plan and distribute educational resources. A decline in student numbers may create a mismatch between enrolment, teacher deployment, classroom capacity and the maintenance of school facilities. Some schools may have underused infrastructure, while others continue to experience shortages of teachers, subject specialists or learning resources. Consequently, national or state-level enrolment figures alone cannot provide a sufficient basis for decisions about individual schools.

Evidence-based resource allocation requires school-level information on student numbers, demographic trends, staffing patterns, infrastructure, learning needs and geographical accessibility. Resources released through rationalisation should be redirected towards improving teaching quality, strengthening foundational learning, providing inclusive facilities and supporting schools with persistent resource gaps. Teacher redeployment should be undertaken carefully to avoid creating new shortages in remote and disadvantaged communities. Efficient resource

utilisation should not be measured solely by reductions in administrative expenditure or the number of schools maintained. It should also be assessed in terms of educational access, learning outcomes, student retention and the equitable distribution of opportunities. NITI Aayog (2026) similarly emphasises evidence-based school rationalisation alongside improvements in infrastructure, teacher deployment and inclusion.

Community Confidence and the Social Role of Government Schools

Government schools often serve as important community institutions, particularly in rural areas. They provide children from diverse social and economic backgrounds with opportunities to learn together and contribute to social interaction within the community. A decline in enrolment may weaken parental confidence in a school, especially when it coincides with concerns about teaching quality, facilities or staffing. School closures may also reduce the availability of a nearby educational institution and affect families' daily routines. Conversely, strengthening school leadership, maintaining regular communication with parents and involving School Management Committees in educational planning can improve institutional accountability and community participation. Visible improvements in teaching, infrastructure, student support and learning outcomes can help rebuild public confidence. Such efforts are particularly important where government schools remain the principal or only accessible educational option for disadvantaged communities.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing declining enrolment in government schools requires a comprehensive approach that combines improvements in educational quality, equitable access, effective school management and evidence-based resource allocation. Policy responses should distinguish between declining enrolment caused by demographic changes and changes associated with parental school preferences, student migration or discontinuation of schooling. NITI Aayog's 2026 report recommends evidence-based school rationalisation, improved infrastructure, stronger teacher deployment, community participation and enhanced teaching and learning as important elements of school education reform.

Strengthening Teaching Quality and Learning Outcomes

Improving the quality of classroom instruction should be a central priority for restoring public confidence in government schools. Governments should ensure adequate teacher availability, provide continuous professional development and promote child-centred, activity-based and inclusive teaching practices. Schools should regularly assess student learning and provide remedial support to learners who experience difficulties, particularly in foundational literacy and numeracy. Greater attention to conceptual understanding, communication, critical thinking and practical learning can help make schooling more meaningful. These measures are consistent with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's emphasis on foundational learning, teacher development and improved educational quality.

Improving Infrastructure and Learning Resources

All government schools should have safe classrooms, functional drinking-water facilities, usable toilets, electricity, libraries and appropriate teaching-learning materials. Infrastructure

development should be based on school-level assessments to identify gaps rather than relying solely on general allocation criteria. Particular attention is needed in remote areas and schools serving disadvantaged communities, including accessible facilities for children with disabilities. Laboratories, digital equipment and internet connectivity should be provided according to curricular requirements and local feasibility. Samagra Shiksha and other relevant government programmes can support these improvements through needs-based planning and the timely utilisation of available funds.

Ensuring Equitable Access and Student Retention

Policies should address barriers that prevent children from entering school, attending regularly or progressing to higher grades. Local authorities and schools should identify children who are out of school or frequently absent and coordinate with families to support their return and continued participation. Scholarships and other entitlements, school meals, transport or escort facilities where needed, and appropriate support for migrant children can reduce obstacles to participation. Separate attention should be given to girls, children with disabilities, tribal communities and economically disadvantaged households. Transition from upper primary to secondary education deserves particular attention because distance, indirect costs and limited local provision may discourage continuation. The NEP 2020 commitment to universal access and equitable participation provides an important policy framework for these efforts.

Adopting Evidence-Based School Rationalization

School consolidation and restructuring should be undertaken only after carefully assessing enrolment patterns, demographic projections, geographical conditions, educational needs and the availability of alternative schools. Where low enrolment makes it difficult to provide an adequate range of educational opportunities, composite schools or school complexes may help share teachers, libraries, laboratories, sports facilities and other resources. However, consolidation should not automatically be treated as the solution to declining enrolment. Authorities must consider travel distance, student safety, transport arrangements, disability access and the potential effects on disadvantaged communities. The primary objective should be to improve educational opportunities while maintaining convenient and equitable access to schooling.

Improving Teacher Deployment and School Management

Teacher deployment should reflect enrolment, subject requirements, school location and the needs of different student groups. Governments should address teacher shortages and imbalances between schools while ensuring that rationalisation does not leave remote or disadvantaged areas understaffed. School heads should receive appropriate leadership and administrative training to improve academic planning, teacher support, attendance monitoring and the effective use of resources. Reducing unnecessary administrative burdens can also enable teachers to devote more time to classroom instruction. Stronger coordination among education departments, local authorities and school leadership is essential for improving institutional functioning.

Strengthening Parental and Community Participation

Restoring confidence in government schools requires regular engagement with parents and local communities. School Management Committees should participate meaningfully in school development planning, monitor the availability of basic facilities and discuss students' attendance and learning needs with school authorities. Parent–teacher meetings, transparent communication about school performance and community participation in educational activities can strengthen accountability and trust. Schools should also communicate their achievements and improvement plans to families. Such engagement can help identify local barriers to enrolment and develop responses suited to community needs.

Using Reliable Data for Planning and Monitoring

Educational planning should draw on reliable, regularly updated school-level data. UDISE+ information can be combined with local demographic records, attendance registers, transition and retention indicators, infrastructure assessments and learning-outcome data to understand enrolment changes more accurately. Education departments should identify schools experiencing sustained declines, investigate the reasons and develop context-specific improvement plans. Progress should be monitored through measurable indicators such as enrolment, attendance, transition rates, student retention, learning outcomes, teacher availability and infrastructure functionality. Data should be interpreted carefully, particularly when comparing periods affected by changes in reporting methods. NITI Aayog's 2026 policy roadmap similarly emphasises measurable performance indicators and clearly identified implementation responsibilities.

Aligning Funding with Local Educational Needs

Resource allocation should consider not only the number of enrolled students but also the actual cost of providing accessible, quality education in different settings. Small schools in remote or sparsely populated areas may need additional support despite having fewer students. Funding decisions should therefore account for geographical disadvantage, student needs, infrastructure gaps and the availability of teachers and learning materials. Resources should be released and used in a timely manner, with transparent monitoring of expenditure and educational outcomes. Savings arising from efficiency measures should support improvements in teaching, facilities, inclusion and student retention rather than being treated as an end in themselves. This approach is consistent with NEP 2020's emphasis on adequate public investment and equitable, high-quality education.

CONCLUSION

Declining enrolment in government schools is a complex educational concern shaped by demographic changes, parental preferences, perceptions of educational quality, infrastructure gaps, socioeconomic circumstances, school accessibility and institutional management. The analysis indicates that changes in enrolment cannot be attributed to a single factor. A decline in the school-age population may reduce overall enrolment, while changes in parental school choices can affect the distribution of students between government and private institutions. These trends must therefore be interpreted alongside indicators of attendance, retention, transition and learning outcomes. The implications extend beyond student numbers to educational equity, school viability, resource allocation and community confidence in public education. Although school consolidation

and resource rationalisation may improve efficiency in appropriate circumstances, decisions based solely on enrolment figures may disadvantage children in remote and underserved areas. Protecting equitable access must remain a priority, particularly for children from economically disadvantaged families, rural communities and other marginalised groups. Strengthening government schools requires sustained attention to teaching quality, teacher availability, functional infrastructure, inclusive learning environments, student retention and meaningful community participation. Reliable school-level data should guide planning, resource allocation and the evaluation of policy interventions. The objectives of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, particularly its emphasis on equitable access, inclusion and quality education, provide a relevant framework for these efforts. In conclusion, the response to declining enrolment should focus not merely on increasing student numbers or reducing the number of schools, but on making government schools accessible, inclusive, effective and responsive to community needs. A coordinated and evidence-based approach that balances educational quality, institutional efficiency and social equity is essential for strengthening public schooling and ensuring meaningful educational opportunities for every child in India.

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