

Can early learning centres become the backbone of India's education revolution?

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In rural India, Anganwadi centres serve as the first classrooms for millions of children, offering not just education but also nutrition, care, and a sense of belonging.

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Can early learning centres become the backbone of India's education revolution?

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In rural India, where nearly 70 percent of the population lives, Anganwadi centres are often a child's first step into structured learning. Within these single-room community spaces, children receive nutrition, care, and initial lessons that prepare them for school and life. For millions, these centres represent their only exposure to early childhood education (ECCE) before entering primary school.

India's Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 network covers about 14 lakh centres nationwide, marking a unique opportunity to enhance infrastructure, resources, and staff training. According to ASER 2024, over 83.3% of four-year-olds are now enrolled in pre-primary institutions, a sign of growing recognition of early learning's importance.

Priya Agarwal, Non-Executive Director at Vedanta Ltd and Chairperson of Hindustan Zinc, writes about how early learning centres are shaping the foundation of India's future.

INVESTING IN EARLY LEARNING PAYS OFF

Global research underscores that early childhood education is both a social and economic investment. Nobel Laureate James Heckman found that quality ECCE programmes can yield annual returns of around 13% by improving education outcomes, health, social behaviour, and lifetime earnings.

When children begin learning in a nurturing environment, the benefits are manifold and lead to enhanced workforce productivity and foster inclusive growth.

WHY PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP MATTER

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can help transform these early learning spaces rapidly and sustainably. The government's vast network already provides reach and structure, while private partners can bring innovation, design thinking, and technology to modernise systems without duplicating existing efforts.

- Transform Anganwadis into safer, inclusive, child-friendly environment
- Equip workers with modern tools, digital content, and training
- Integrate health, nutrition, and learning into cohesive daily routines
- Use data and real-time feedback for tracking and improvement

However, true success lies in community co-creation – ensuring that transformations reflect local realities instead of top-down models.

PARTNERSHIP DRIVING CHANGE

Across India, several promising collaborations illustrate what's possible. In Delhi, education departments and non-profits have developed age-appropriate preschool curricula in government schools, thereby improving school readiness.

Globally, countries are advancing similar goals. Australia's Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) provides a national guide promoting play-based learning and inclusivity.

Brazil's Criança Feliz programme supports home-based early stimulation and parental engagement in low-income areas, while South Africa's Preschools of the Future movement mobilise communities to run quality preschools and build local accountability.

Each demonstrates how partnerships can scale equity and impact.

For India to realise the full potential of its first classrooms, a few guiding principles are critical:

- Enhance early learning quality: Move from rote learning to activity-based approaches that build language, numeracy, and social-emotional skills
- Professionalise ECCE staff: Provide ongoing training, mentoring, and adequate staffing to maintain the quality of education and a healthy teacher-child ratio
- Engage families: Create parent workshops and home-visit programmes to reinforce playful learning at home
- Use data for action: Conduct regular developmental assessments to track child progress and refine programme design

With over a billion aspirations resting on its youngest citizens, India's Anganwadis can be more than classrooms – they can be engines of inclusive growth. By blending public reach, private innovation, and community participation, the country can ensure that every child's first classroom nurtures curiosity, confidence, and lifelong learning.

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