Annenberg Institute
BROWN UNIVERSITY

EdWorkingPaper No. 26-1662

Mother Tongue by Policy, English-Medium by Demand

Saloni Gupta
Brown University

India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) recommends mother-tongue instruction wherever possible. I combine Census mother-tongue counts with school records to assess potential mother-tongue provision. Even under the most favourable matching, schools could not have provided mother-tongue instruction to 45% of children in 2025–26, up from 33% in 2005–06. Meanwhile, English-medium enrolment rose from 5% to 29%. Some states have promoted English-medium instruction in government schools to attract students, citing parental demand and private-school competition. The shortfall continued to widen after NEP 2020, leaving its recommendation disconnected from school provision and the incentives driving English-medium expansion.

VERSION: November 2026

Suggested citation: Gupta, Saloni. (2026). Mother Tongue by Policy, English-Medium by Demand. (EdWorkingPaper: 26-1662). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: https://doi.org/10.26300/c1km-p094

Mother Tongue by Policy, English-Medium by Demand

Saloni Gupta
Department of Education, Brown University
saloni_gupta@brown.edu

October 2026

Working paper.
The online supplement follows the main text.

Funding: This research received no funding. Competing interests: The author has no competing interests to disclose.
AI assistance: AI software (Claude, Anthropic; Codex, OpenAI) assisted during manuscript preparation.
The author is solely responsible for all content.

Mother Tongue by Policy, English-Medium by Demand

Abstract

India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) recommends mother-tongue instruction wherever possible. I combine Census mother-tongue counts with school records to assess potential mother-tongue provision. Even under the most favourable matching, schools could not have provided mother-tongue instruction to 45% of children in 2025–26, up from 33% in 2005–06. Meanwhile, English-medium enrolment rose from 5% to 29%. Some states have promoted English-medium instruction in government schools to attract students, citing parental demand and private-school competition. The shortfall continued to widen after NEP 2020, leaving its recommendation disconnected from school provision and the incentives driving English-medium expansion.
Keywords: multilingual learners; language of instruction; mother tongue; English-medium schooling; education policy; India

Introduction

School systems worldwide face a tension between the educational value of mother-tongue instruction and the institutional and economic value of English proficiency. Foundational bilingual-education scholarship argues that when children's mother tongue is developed, it supports their learning of a second language (Cummins, 1979), while Delpit (1988) emphasises the importance of teaching marginalised children the linguistic and cultural codes that provide access to powerful institutions. Evidence from India supports both arguments. Children taught in their mother tongue show stronger foundational literacy gains (Arvind et al., 2024), and adults who speak English fluently earn substantially more than those who do not (Azam, Chin, & Prakash, 2013). The case for mother-tongue instruction therefore coexists with reasons for families to seek English-medium instruction.

I examine how far India's schools were able to accommodate children in their mother tongues and how enrolment shifted across instructional languages. Linking population and nation-wide school records makes it possible to assess the distance between India's 2020 national policy commitment to mother-tongue instruction and the school systems available to deliver it.

Context

India's linguistic diversity makes mother-tongue instruction a challenge within individual states and classrooms. The 2011 Census separately reported 270 mother tongues, while the Constitution recognises 22 scheduled languages. Internal migration within and across states brings families from different linguistic regions into the same classrooms. Rural and tribal communities also speak languages different from their schools' (Arvind et al., 2024). Children therefore enter an education system in which their languages have unequal recognition and instructional support. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) states that wherever possible the medium of instruction until at least grade 5 will be the home language, mother tongue,

local or regional language, in public and private schools alike (NEP 2020, para. 4.11). The clause was contested as soon as the policy was released: commentators argued that it ignored families' demand for English, defenders cited the evidence on learning in the mother tongue, and linguists asked which of a child's several languages it meant, since the Census unfairly groups many mother tongues under one regional language (see online supplement).

Data and Methods

I estimate the largest share of children whom existing schools could have taught in their mother tongue. Within each district, I compare the population's mother-tongue composition, from the Census 2011, with the medium of instruction of the schools in which children in grades 1–8 are enrolled, from the District Information System for Education (DISE, later U-DISE and UDISE+) for 2005–06 to 2025–26. Assuming children share their district's population language composition, the estimate counts, for each language, the smaller of its share of children and its share of school enrolment. Suppose Bhojpuri speakers constitute 30% of children, but Bhojpuri-medium schools account for 5% of enrolment: Bhojpuri-medium provision was able to accommodate only five of those 30 children. This is the most generous estimate of mother-tongue accommodation that reported school provision allows: it assumes children can attend any school within their district, regardless of distance, fees or admission restrictions. I hold the Census 2011 population language shares fixed to compare school provision against a common demographic benchmark. Because internal migration has continued to increase since 2011, districts have likely become more linguistically diverse rather than less, so the estimates probably understate the shortfall in later years. Figure 1 combines the district estimates into national shares for each year, weighting each district by its enrolment. Figure 2 shows how enrolment was divided across instructional languages in eight selected city areas.

Results

Reported school provision could not have accommodated 41% of children in their mother tongue in 2019–20, the last observed year before NEP 2020 (Figure 1). This national shortfall had risen from 33% in 2005–06. It continued to widen after NEP 2020, reaching 45% in 2025–26. Between 2005–06 and 2025–26, English-medium enrolment rose from 5% to 29%, while potential non-English mother-tongue matching fell from 67% to 55%. NEP 2020 therefore recommended mother-tongue instruction to a school system that was already moving away from it, and that movement has continued since the policy was adopted.

English accounted for most enrolment in seven of the eight selected city areas by 2025–26 (Figure 2). Mumbai and Kolkata mark the range of this change. In Mumbai, English's share rose from 39% in 2005–08 to 72% in 2025–26, while Marathi's fell from 30% to 11%. In Kolkata, English's share rose from 6% to 19% by 2015–16 and then held steady, and Bengali remained the medium for most children, at 63% in 2025–26. The shift towards English was therefore widespread but not uniform across regions.

The growth of English-medium enrolment is not simply a by-product of families moving to private schools. Within private unaided schools, English-medium enrolment grew far faster than enrolment in schools teaching in Indian languages, including regional languages and mother tongues: between 2006–07 and 2025–26, it grew by 366%, compared with 12% (Figure S1, online supplement). Government schools,

which still accounted for 53% of grades 1–8 enrolment in 2025–26, have also moved towards English. Tamil Nadu and Telangana introduced English-medium instruction to attract children to government schools, citing competition from private schools and parental demand, respectively (see online supplement).

Discussion

Over the two decades examined here, mother-tongue provision in India's elementary schools contracted while English-medium provision expanded, the opposite of what NEP 2020 recommends. This tension between mother-tongue instruction and demand for a dominant language is not unique to India. In Kenya, a randomised trial found that adding mother-tongue literacy instruction improved children's reading in their mother tongue, yet teachers' unfamiliarity with local languages and resistance in some communities constrained its implementation (Piper et al., 2016). In the United States, English learners in bilingual and dual-language programmes progressed more slowly in the early grades but by the end of high school were more likely to have been reclassified as proficient in English than peers in English immersion (Umansky & Reardon, 2014). Mother-tongue instruction and English proficiency therefore need not compete. Making the two goals compatible requires institutional support for mother-tongue instruction alongside English: teachers prepared for multilingual classrooms, appropriate instructional materials and continuity across grades.

References

Arvind, S., Kumar, D., Banerji, R., & Wadhwa, W. (2024). *Understanding the dynamics of home language instruction in shaping children's foundational learning: Evidence from rural India*. ASER Centre. Paper presented at the Annual Conference on Economic Growth and Development, Indian Statistical Institute, Delhi.

Azam, M., Chin, A., & Prakash, N. (2013). The returns to English-language skills in India. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, *61*(2), 335–367. https://doi.org/10.1086/668277

Cummins, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research*, *49*(2), 222–251. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543049002222

Delpit, L. D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, *58*(3), 280–298. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.58.3.c43481778r528qw4

Piper, B., Zuilkowski, S. S., & Ong'ele, S. (2016). Implementing mother tongue instruction in the real world: Results from a medium-scale randomized controlled trial in Kenya. *Comparative Education Review*, *60*(4), 776–807. https://doi.org/10.1086/688493

Umansky, I. M., & Reardon, S. F. (2014). Reclassification patterns among Latino English learner students in bilingual, dual immersion, and English immersion classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, *51*(5), 879–912. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831214545110

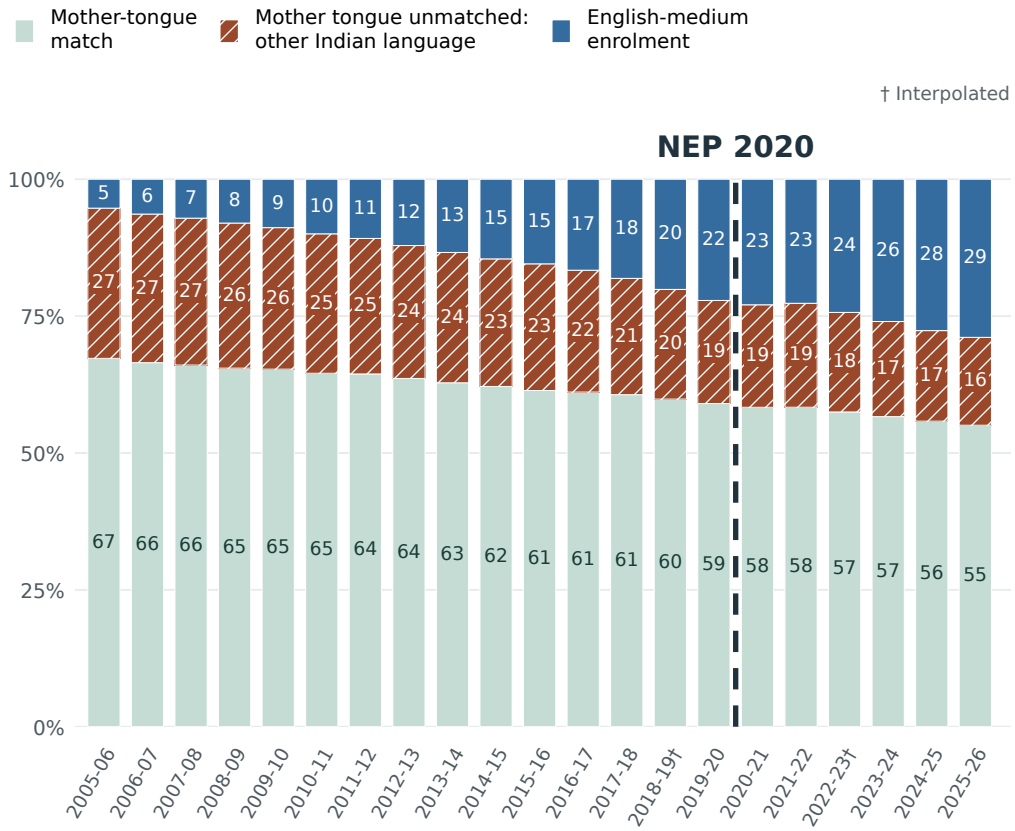


Figure 1. *Mother-tongue matching and English-medium enrolment in India, 2005–06 to 2025–26.*
Note. Each bar represents all children enrolled in grades 1–8 in India in a school year and sums to 100%. The lowest segment is the share of children whom schools could have taught in their mother tongue, under the most generous matching described in the text. The middle, hatched segment is the share whose mother tongue was not matched by school provision and who were enrolled in schools teaching in another Indian language. The top segment is the share enrolled in English-medium schools. Together, the middle and top segments show the children whom school provision could not teach in their mother tongue. District estimates are combined into national shares, weighting each district by its enrolment. The dashed line marks the adoption of NEP 2020. Years marked † lack national data; their values are interpolated from adjacent years.
Sources. Census of India 2011, Table C-16; DISE, U-DISE and UDISE+ school records.

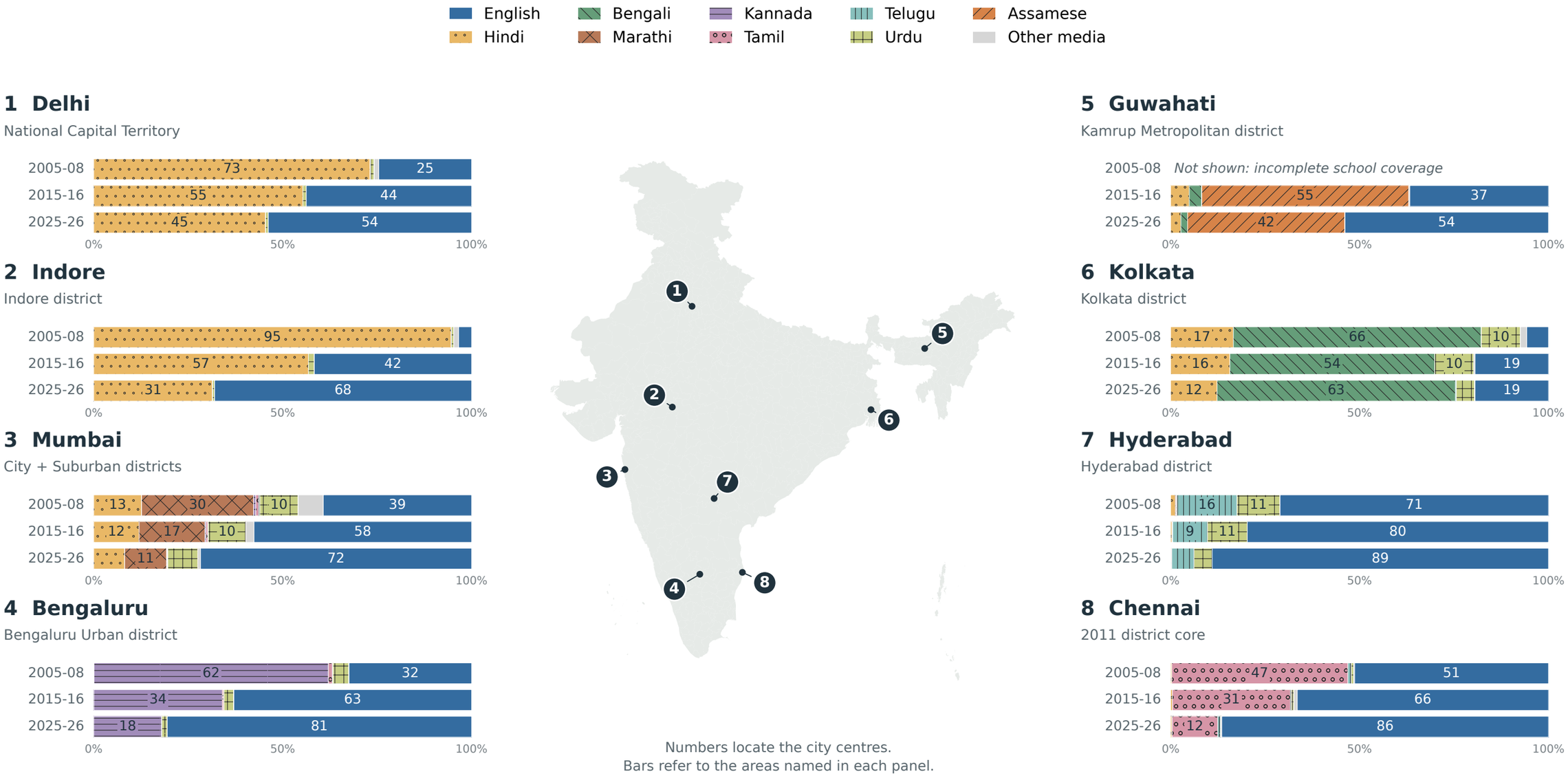


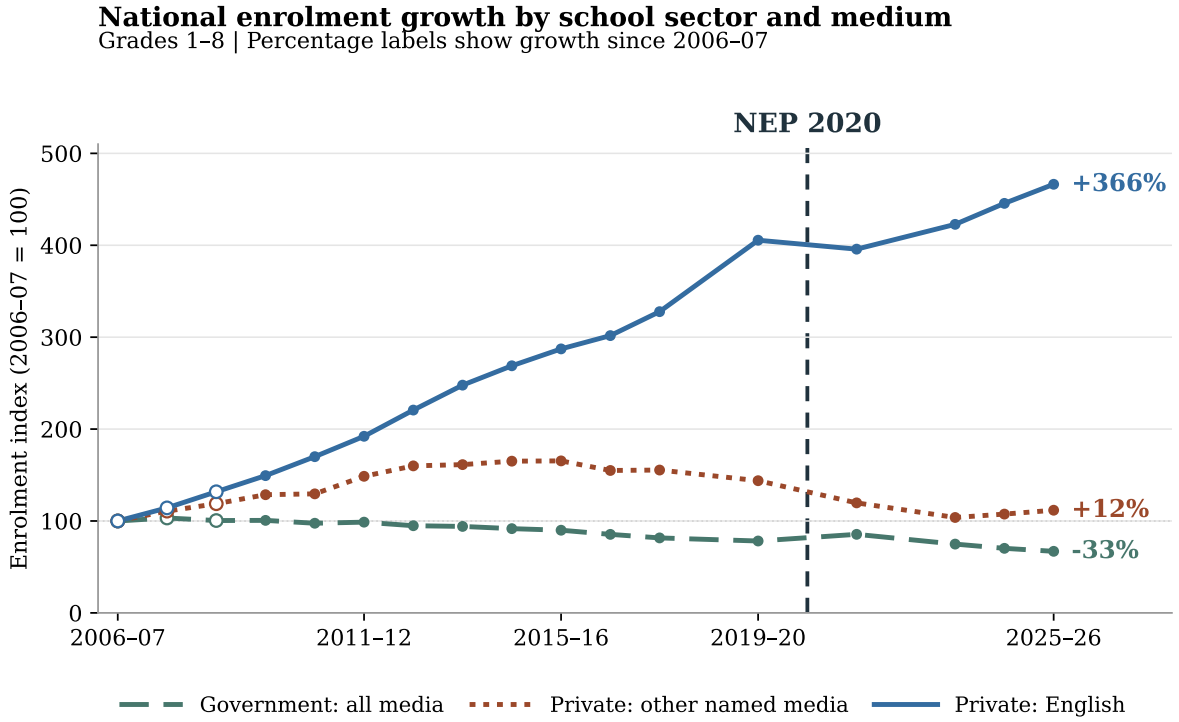
Figure 2. *Twenty years of change in school medium in eight selected city areas, 2005–08, 2015–16 and 2025–26.*
Note. The map locates eight city areas selected from different language regions. In each panel, a bar shows how children enrolled in grades 1–8 were divided across their schools' languages of instruction, and sums to 100%. English is shown in solid blue; each Indian language has its own colour and pattern. Percentages are shown for segments of at least 8.5%. The 2005–08 bars combine enrolment from 2005–06 to 2007–08, because records from the earliest years omit some urban schools. Guwahati's 2005–08 bar is not shown because its English-medium schools are largely missing from the records before 2014–15. City areas are Census 2011 districts: Delhi is the National Capital Territory, Mumbai combines Mumbai City and Mumbai Suburban, Bengaluru is Bengaluru Urban and Guwahati is Kamrup Metropolitan. Chennai's 2025–26 bar includes only schools within the district's 2011 boundary. The eight areas illustrate regional variation and do not represent all Indian cities.
Sources. DISE, U-DISE and UDISE+ school records; Census 2011 district boundaries; Chennai school locations from OpenCity records. Map: datameet/maps (CC BY 2.5 IN).

Mother Tongue by Policy, English-Medium by Demand

Online Supplement

Additional figure

Figure S1. Enrolment growth in government and private unaided schools, 2006–07 to 2025–26.



Note. Each line follows grades 1–8 enrolment in one group of schools, relative to its 2006–07 level (2006–07 = 100); labels at the right give the change since 2006–07. The solid line is private unaided schools teaching in English, and the dotted line is private unaided schools teaching in Indian languages. The dashed line is government schools, run by education and welfare departments and local bodies, teaching in any language. A rising line means enrolment in that group grew. The vertical dashed line marks the adoption of NEP 2020. Lines connect years with available data; hollow points mark years in which a few districts' missing records are filled from adjacent years.

Source. Author's calculations from DISE, U-DISE and UDISE+ school records.

Sources for the policy discussion

Gupta (2020) argued that NEP 2020's recommendation conflicted with families' aspirations for English-medium schooling. Daniyal (2020) defended early instruction in familiar languages and subsequent acquisition of English. Agnihotri (2026) later questioned the Census's aggregation of mother tongues and the treatment of multilingual repertoires as fixed language categories.

Government statements also connect English-medium provision to attracting students. In May 2013, Tamil Nadu's education minister described English sections as one response to declining government-school enrolment and private-school growth (Press Trust of India, 2013). In January 2022, Telangana's cabinet announcement linked its English-medium initiative to rural parents' willingness to enrol children in gov-

ernment schools if English were offered (Press Trust of India, 2022). The Telangana government's Socio Economic Outlook 2024 records the introduction of English-medium instruction in government schools from 2022–23, initially in grades 1–8 (Government of Telangana, 2024, section 3.2.2.1). These statements document the governments' reasons for expanding English provision. The 2025–26 government-school share uses grades 1–8 enrolment: 87,065,947 of 165,157,298 students (52.7%), with government schools identified by the recorded broad management category. All media are retained, without a Census-geography restriction. This scope differs from the earlier all-grade report comparison.

Replication. The replication package contains the data, code and documentation needed to reproduce the reported estimates and figures. A repository location and DOI will be added before publication.

References

Agnihotri, R. K. (2026, June 30). *In Communicado: What census surveys and national education policies get wrong about India's languages*. The Caravan. Article.

Daniyal, S. (2020, August 6). Why is India obsessed with English-medium education—when it goes against scientific consensus? *Scroll.in*. Article.

Government of Telangana. (2024). *Socio Economic Outlook 2024*, section 3.2.2.1, English Medium Schools. Directorate of Economics and Statistics. Report.

Gupta, S. (2020, August 1). Modi govt's NEP is out of touch with reality, Indian voters want English-medium education. *ThePrint*. Article.

Press Trust of India. (2013, May 10). TN 'concern' over decrease in enrolment in govt schools. *Business Standard*. Article.

Press Trust of India. (2022, January 18). Telangana to introduce English medium in govt schools from next academic year. *Careers360*. Article.