

# The world requires inoculation against statist policies

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## The NCF will raise standards of school education in the country.

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**It offers a broad canvass that could take schooling beyond the narrow confines of rigid curricula**



Currently, private schools can only be run as an educational charitable trust which means any profits the school makes have to be retained and cannot be taken out. In turn, the government often provides land at highly concessional rates to set up these schools. Photo: HT

**NEW DELHI** : The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF) released by the ministry of education (MoE) is intended to guide school education. Since education is not only relevant to its immediate participants but is critical to the well-being of society at large, it is useful to understand what the NCF is about. In the spirit of full disclosure, I am a member of the group the ministry constituted to develop it.

Curriculum refers to the entire experience of children in schools in pursuit of educational objectives—the learning goals, syllabus, pedagogical practices, teaching-learning-materials, classroom practices, culture of schools, and more. This expansive notion of

curriculum is important to use rather than a narrow definition because children's learning is shaped by all these aspects. This broad understanding of curriculum is more real than the narrower idea that includes only the syllabus, content, pedagogy and assessment.

The NCF is not a curriculum; it's a framework to develop curricula. As a framework, it describes the principles, goals, structures and elements for the development of curricula, which will then guide the syllabus, teaching-learning material including textbooks and assessment (examinations). All of these will have to be developed by appropriate institutions at the state level, like boards or other bodies responsible for schools. The NCF will guide the pedagogy, as also the practices that determine school culture and other experiences of school students that schooling systems will have to nurture, change and develop.

Such a common national framework enables harmony and cogency in school education across Indian states, while recognizing that school education is the domain of states. The NCF is thus an important mechanism that upholds the integrity of our country's federal structure. It provides common principles and objectives derived from our constitutional vision, educational research, and experience, but states determine their own priorities and the curricula for their school systems.

The NCF could have remained at a high level of abstraction in its approach and principles. But decades of experience suggests that specificity is critical to enable practitioners of education. 'Practitioners' include teachers, school leaders, syllabus developers, textbook authors, education administrators and others. The details in the NCF aim to help change actual practices on the ground. Yet, none of its details is prescriptive, it is only explanatory.

For example, the NCF could just say a school's cultural practices must promote equity and pluralism. Instead, the NCF states this principle, but then goes on to specifically articulate practices that help develop the values of equity and pluralism. The specific practices ground the principles and make them real. But these practices are illustrative, and schools are free to choose and develop their own practices based on these principles.

In essence, a teacher or anyone else developing the syllabus should be able to draw implications for this role from the NCF with minimal intervention by 'education experts'. This seems like a basic requirement for all such documents. Surprisingly, this has often not been the case.

In order to be effective in bringing about desired changes in practices on the ground, the NCF is designed so that it can be implemented with resources that schools currently have. This isn't to say that the NCF is not committed to ensuring that schools get the resources they need and must have. But it also recognizes that implementation cannot be predicated on all the resources being available right away. If we wait until we have all that schools need, the practical reality of our country is such that implementation will keep getting pushed out with the excuse that "we will do it when we have the resources."

The approach taken by the NCF is to ensure that it is implementable within current circumstances, charting a path forward as the resources improve. For instance, the NCF gives the same importance to the arts, including music, as to mathematics. But the immediate response would be, "We need arts teachers in all schools before we can hold arts classes." But this can take as long as 10-15 years.

To address this practical reality, the NCF does three things. First, it articulates learning standards for arts that must be achieved even if a dedicated subject teacher is not available. Second, it creates 'timetable space' for arts in accordance with its importance. Third, it suggests a practical way of training existing teachers (say, of a language or mathematics, for instance), with the help of other available local resources, so that they are able to teach arts to meet learning standards.

In the past week, since the NCF has been released, most media headlines have focused on its suggestions for board exams, reflecting our society's obsession with testing. This is one of the very attributes that the NCF attempts to change. But the document reaches deep into all aspects of school education. Over the next several columns, we will explore how the NCF deals with these many other specific and important aspects of school education, and how these may help in improving it.

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**No country could be a more vivid example for the G20 than India of the damaging effects of industrial and trade policies that continue to handicap the ingenuity of millions**

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