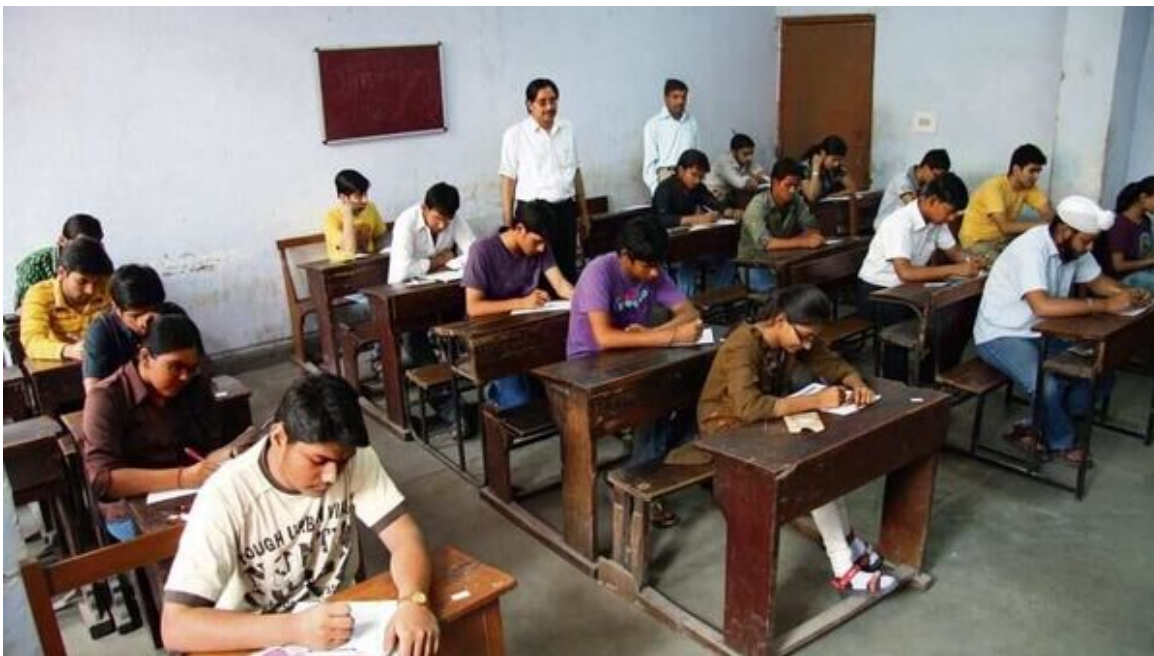


We need an education system that isn't held hostage by exams

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Board examinations are among the key problems of Indian education. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 (NCF) confronts this matter head-on, starting with explicitly acknowledging current issues instead of dodging these.

Stress caused by board exams among students and their families is the first big issue. This is driven by a variety of reasons, including: exams marks being seen socially as measure of 'intrinsic worth' and believing that they have life-altering effects; the results of these examinations being used for college admissions or sometimes even for jobs later; underperformance on just one day of exams having severe effects; and commercial interests that create artificial competitive pressures so as to make money from coaching and tuition.

Second, most board examinations do not achieve their primary purpose, and worse, misguide much educational effort in schools. These exams are supposed to certify competencies attained by students at the end of grades 10 and 12. Instead, too many mostly test memorization of a huge range of facts. This fundamental misalignment gives a woefully incomplete (at best) or incorrect (at worst) picture of student learning. Third, most test instruments are poorly designed, which leads to unacceptable variations between evaluators and overall inconsistency. In brief: the validity and reliability of too many of our board exams are poor.

Misdirected exam design ends up undermining all aspects of education, from teaching and classroom or school practices to text books, which all tend to focus on facts and memorization, rather than on real learning and achieving competencies and curricular goals.

The NCF makes significant changes in board exams to address these issues. These changes are interrelated and in conjunction with those in the overall curricular approach, related to learning standards, content, textbooks, pedagogical methods and more.

The burden of board examinations on students would be reduced through multiple actions. By making exams 'easier and lighter,' for example, which doesn't imply less rigour, but the reverse, as it requires focusing sharply on competencies rather than fact recounting. The content load across subjects would be reduced significantly.

All board exams will be offered at least twice a year, giving students the option to take an exam a second time and improve. Only the best score will be reflected in the mark-sheet. Over a period, we will move to 'on-demand' exams, meaning whenever the student is ready. This move will significantly help reduce stress, because students will neither be penalized for a particular day's performance, nor be judged forever on potentially false readings of their actual learning.

Board examinations would assess the achievement of competencies for the secondary stage, as stated in the Curriculum. These exams will provide a valid and reliable picture of student performance on those competencies. To ensure this, all aspects of test design will be worked upon, including rigorous selection of test developers and evaluators, and their appropriate training; improvement in the test development process; and a periodic review of the efficacy, validity and reliability of the redesigned exams.

Admission methods for higher education are not within the NCF's remit, but it explicitly states the issues. In terms of capacity, India is short of high-quality higher education institutions (HEIs), which makes admission at that level a process of selection through elimination. With hundreds of thousands of students chasing a minuscule number of HEI seats, competition is fierce. In board exams, all students can do as well as the others, as these are assessments of learning. But in higher- education admissions, many must lose out, given our capacity constraint.

The solution to this crisis is not within the school system. Though, even more than board exams, this situation is the cause of many serious problems among school students, including high stress and serious mental health issues (not just afflicting students but also their families); a culture of commercial coaching and tutoring; and a deep and wide trend to ignore real learning and focus on 'cracking' entrance tests for college admissions, vitiating the very purpose of school education.

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) has a comprehensive set of responses to address these challenges, including some that have been implemented, such as a Common University Entrance Test. But the core solution to the crisis lies in a substantial expansion of the number of high-quality HEIs we have. The NEP has set out a clear path towards this, though given the array of sustained actions required to turn this into reality, it will be a very long haul.

While this column has touched only upon board exams, the NCF has a comprehensive framework and detailed guidelines for examinations across grades. We must change and improve these to enable real learning and make genuine assessments of it. The NCF is fully conscious of the truth in the old wisecrack about Indian education: "Hamare yahaan shikshaa nahin, pareekshaa tantra hai." We have an exam system, not an education system.