



POLICY MEMORANDUM



REFORMING KARNATAKA'S PRE-PRIMARY, PRIMARY-SECONDARY EDUCATION SYSTEM



Karnataka's Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examination system is under scrutiny for its stringency and misalignment with national educational standards.



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IN ASSOCIATION WITH



KAMS KARNATAKA



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Background and Context



Karnataka's Secondary School Leaving Certificate (**SSLC**) examination system is under scrutiny for its stringency and misalignment with national educational standards. In 2024, the SSLC pass rate was artificially raised to 73.4% by invoking unprecedented grace marks (lowering the qualifying mark from 35% to 25% and granting up to 20% extra marks) (Annexure 1.). Even so, this pass rate remains far below the ~99% success rates of national boards like CBSE and ICSE (Annexure 1.). The Government's reliance on ad-hoc measures (e.g. mass grace marks) highlights systemic issues in our examination and curriculum framework. Under Right to Education (RTE) Act, all students are entitled to equitable quality education, which implies that Karnataka must ensure its state board standards do not put its students at a disadvantage vis-à-vis other boards. This memorandum analyzes the current SSLC criteria in comparison to other boards, identifies key areas of disadvantage for our students (in assessment and curriculum), and recommends policy actions for urgent reform from the foundational level upward.



Stake Holders Lighting the Lamp during Round Table Meet.



Disparities in SSLC Examination Criteria



A comparative review of Class 10 examination policies reveals that Karnataka's SSLC has more stringent pass criteria and a less flexible assessment structure than most other boards:

- **Passing Marks:** Karnataka requires a 35% score in each subject to pass, higher than the **33%** combined score criterion followed by CBSE and ICSE (**2. Criteriafor10.docx**) (**Annexure 1.**). Neighboring southern states also mostly use **35% as a pass mark**, but some allow relaxed minimums in certain subjects (e.g. Tamil Nadu allows a lower threshold in Science, Andhra Pradesh in Hindi) (**2. Criteriafor10.docx**). Notably, **Kerala's state board sets the pass mark at only 30% in each subject with no separate "paper minimum"** (**2. Criteriafor10.docx**). In contrast, CBSE/ICSE consider students passed if they secure 33% overall in a subject, counting both internal and external marks (**2. Criteriafor10.docx**). This makes national boards' exams more student-friendly in terms of pass criteria.
- **Internal Assessment Utilization:** Most boards integrate internal assessments into the final result. For example, CBSE mandates 20 marks of internal assessment (periodic tests, projects, etc.) and 80 marks for the board exam, and a student needs 33% overall to pass – internal scores contribute to this threshold (Annexure 1.) (**CBSE to introduce two levels of Mathematics for All India Secondary School Examination**). A CBSE student who scores say 13/80 in the board exam but has 20/20 in internal (total 33/100) is still considered to have passed, since the internal component is counted as part of the holistic evaluation (**Annexure 1.**). In Karnataka's SSLC, however, the 20 internal marks per subject are not counted toward passing. Each student must separately score 35% in the board exam portion itself (minimum 28 out of 80 in each core subject), regardless of internal marks (Annexure 1.). For instance, a Karnataka student who scores 23/80 on the exam and a full 20/20 in internals (total 43/100, which is above 40%) would still fail because they did not meet the 28-mark theory minimum (**Annexure 1.**). This rigid structure – unique to Karnataka – denies students the benefit of coursework/internal performance and raises the bar for passing compared to boards that allow combined scoring.



Disparities in SSLC Examination Criteria



- **Subject and Paper Structure:** Karnataka is the only state board where the first language paper carries 125 marks (with a proportionally higher pass mark of 44) (**2. Criteria for 10.docx**) (**Annexure 1.**). In all other boards (state and national), each subject/paper is standardized at 100 marks. This inflated marking scheme in Karnataka effectively means students have to tackle a heavier first-language paper and achieve a higher raw score to pass it, adding to their burden. Furthermore, Karnataka's SSLC includes three language subjects (with the first language often being Kannada or another regional language, plus English and a third language) and three core subjects, similar to other states. However, unlike ICSE, which offers flexibility in subject grouping and CBSE which allows a skill subject to replace a failed core subject (**Annexure 1.**), Karnataka does not offer such academic fallback options. The lack of flexibility can hurt students who might excel in vocational or non-core subjects but have one weak core subject.

Impact: These policy differences result in a clear disadvantage for Karnataka's students in terms of passing the board examination. The higher bar (35% in each paper with no internal credit) translates into more students failing or barely passing the SSLC. Historically, Karnataka's pass percentages (pre-grace adjustment) have hovered in the 70–85% range, while CBSE and ICSE consistently see 90–99% of Class 10 students passing (**Annexure 1.**) The gap implies thousands of Karnataka students each year who, under a CBSE/ICSE regime, might have been declared successful, are instead labelled as failed. This not only affects their morale and progression into higher secondary education but also increases the risk of dropouts. The 2023-24 experience, wherein the government had to intervene with one-time relaxations to boost the pass rate (**Annexure 1.**), underscores that the current SSLC evaluation system is mis-calibrated relative to contemporary standards.





Curriculum and Textbook Alignment Issues



The disadvantages faced by Karnataka's students are not limited to exam policies; they are rooted in deeper issues with the state's curriculum and textbooks. A comprehensive review by an NCERT-led team in 2017 of Karnataka's textbooks (Classes I-VIII) (**Annexure 2.**) found significant gaps in age-appropriateness and alignment with the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005. Key findings include:

- **Content not Age-Appropriate:** Several state textbooks introduce concepts and terminology much earlier than recommended, without sufficient grounding. For example, the Class V Mathematics textbook uses advanced geometric terms such as "plane figure," "perpendicular," and "measure of rotation," which are typically meant for higher classes. Reviewers noted an "obsession to introduce higher concepts/contents" even at primary levels. In one case, the concept of reducing fractions to lowest terms – a fairly advanced skill – was included in Class IV/V content, which is beyond the cognitive level of that age group (as fraction equivalence is usually mastered later). This premature introduction of complex topics can confuse young learners and hinder solid foundational understanding.
- **Rote-Oriented Learning:** The NCERT analysis observed that many of Karnataka's textbooks remain focused on factual knowledge and definitions, rather than fostering understanding. In the Class V Maths book, students are given straightforward results and rules to memorize (e.g. formulas or properties) instead of being guided through activities to discover these results on their own. One excerpt from the review explicitly states that merely providing "straightforward results for the children to remember" rather than engaging them in activities to derive conclusions will not develop their conceptual understanding. Similarly, in science, the Class VIII science textbook was found to pack in too many abstract concepts (e.g. detailed atomic theory, advanced physics concepts like total internal reflection) without ensuring prerequisites were covered or that students had the opportunity to experiment and explore. The reviewers warned that introducing such difficult concepts in Class VIII, in a purely theoretical manner, "will not only encourage rote learning but may drive children away from learning science". In short, the pedagogy in many textbooks did not align with NCF-2005's constructivist, student-centred approach.



Curriculum and Textbook Alignment Issues



- **Alignment with NCF 2005:** The National Curriculum Framework 2005 and the Karnataka Curriculum Framework 2005 emphasize child-centric learning, connecting knowledge to real life, and a spiral progression of concepts. The NCERT review found that while the intent of the state's 2017 textbook revision was to follow NCF-2005, in practice many textbooks fell short. The content often remained overly factual and detached from everyday contexts. For instance, environmental studies and social science books did include local examples and some contemporary issues, but certain important themes (e.g. discussions on social inequities, local governance) were superficial or missing – indicating misalignment with the NCF's guidelines for values and contextual learning. Importantly, the NCERT team pointed out that some material in Karnataka's textbooks was actually beyond the standard level for that grade. **In the words of one review observation, parts of the textbook were "loaded with more factual information which is difficult for a child of [that] class" and introduced technical terms meant for higher classes. Teachers in Karnataka have echoed these concerns, noting that some content in state textbooks is more challenging than even Pre-University (PU) level syllabi, which is alarming for secondary school material (as recorded in discussions during the July 2024 round-table conference).**

Consequences: These curricular issues mean that Karnataka's students often face a double burden – content that is too advanced or not engaging in early grades, and a tough, high-stakes exam at the end of Grade 10. Many students may not fully grasp fundamental concepts in primary and middle school because of the misaligned curriculum, leading to learning gaps that manifest in poor performance by Grade 10. Additionally, the lack of adherence to national standards (NCF 2005/NCERT) puts state-board students at a disadvantage when competing for national-level exams and opportunities, as they may not have covered topics with the same depth or pedagogy. In essence, the current textbook framework does not adequately prepare students for the SSLC exam or for a smooth transition to higher secondary education – instead, it may be contributing to the need for grace marks and the high stress observed among SSLC candidates.



Need for Systemic Reform from Early Grades



Given the above analysis, it is evident that piecemeal fixes (like awarding grace marks or minor tweaks in one exam) will not suffice. Karnataka requires systemic reform starting from the foundational stages of education (Pre-Primary to Grade 5), which will then ripple up to healthier outcomes at the secondary level. Early interventions are critical because international and national research consistently show that a strong foundation in literacy, numeracy, and conceptual understanding by Grade 5 is essential for success in higher grades.



Key areas for foundational reform include:

- Curriculum Overhaul and NCERT Alignment (Pre-Primary to Grade 5): Karnataka should align its state curriculum with the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) standards, especially for core subjects in early grades. This could involve adopting NCERT textbooks (widely used in CBSE schools) or closely modeling state textbooks on NCERT content to ensure age-appropriate sequencing of topics. An NCERT-aligned curriculum would address current gaps by introducing concepts at the right age/grade and using proven pedagogical approaches. For example, basics of fractions or algebra would be introduced at the stages recommended by NCF, ensuring children are cognitively ready. Aligning with NCERT also facilitates smoother transitions for students who might switch boards and helps teachers access a wealth of existing training resources and materials (since NCERT is used nationally). Notably, all CBSE-affiliated schools in Karnataka already follow NCERT curricula (Annexure 1.), so extending this to state board schools will create a common learning standard for all children in the state.



Need for Systemic Reform from Early Grades



- **Teacher Training and Pedagogy:** Alongside curriculum alignment, reforms must equip primary teachers with training in child-centric, activity-based pedagogy as envisioned by NCF 2005 (and reiterated in the new National Education Policy 2020). Teachers need support to shift from rote-driven instruction to methods that encourage students to explore and understand. The NCERT review suggests that even where good content is present, without proper pedagogy (e.g. guiding students to derive answers, relate to daily life), the impact is lost. Continuous teacher professional development, mentoring, and revised teaching guides should accompany the introduction of any new curriculum or textbooks.
- **Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE):** Reinstate and strengthen CCE in early grades to regularly assess student understanding and address learning gaps before they widen. CCE aligns with RTE's vision for child-friendly assessment and was part of Karnataka's own reforms in 2014 (Annexure 1). Reviving CCE will reduce the overemphasis on one-shot exams by monitoring progress through quizzes, projects, and skills demonstrations from the foundational stage upward. Early identification of learning difficulties can then inform remedial teaching, ensuring students are truly prepared by the time they reach Grade 10.

Investing effort in Pre-Primary to Grade 5 reform is crucial because it lays the groundwork for all later learning. If these reforms are undertaken in the next few years, the cohort of students entering high school will be much better prepared, conceptually sound, and able to handle secondary-level academics without the need for last-minute grace mark interventions. Such alignment with national curriculum standards from the ground up will also fulfill Karnataka's obligations **under RTE Section 29**, which prescribes that state curricula and evaluation methods conform to the values and methodology of the national framework (NCF). In sum, strengthening the base will elevate the entire edifice of Karnataka's school education.

Parity among School Boards in Karnataka under RTE

- At present, there is a stark disparity in academic standards and results between different school boards operating in Karnataka. Students in CBSE and ICSE schools benefit from more liberal passing criteria and nationally standardized content, whereas students in State Board schools face tougher exams and a divergent curriculum. This inequity runs counter to the spirit of the Right to Education Act, which envisions equal educational opportunity for all children. The RTE Act (Section 29) entrusts academic authorities (like **NCERT/SCERT**) to develop a curriculum that is uniform in quality and aimed at holistic development across all schools. Thus, it is incumbent on the state to ensure parity so that a child's future is not dependent on the accident of which board their school is affiliated to.

Policy actions to create parity include:

- Unified Learning Standards:** Establish common learning outcomes for each grade that apply to all schools in Karnataka, regardless of board. The state's education department can collaborate with CBSE and ICSE schools in the state to benchmark key competencies expected at each stage. For example, by Grade 5, all students (state board or otherwise) should have achieved a certain proficiency in reading comprehension, basic math operations, etc. These standards can be derived from NCERT and NCF guidelines. Having unified benchmarks will push the state curriculum to raise its quality to match national levels (or vice versa in rare cases), thereby levelling the field.



Parity among School Boards in Karnataka under RTE

- **Common Assessments or Moderation:** While merging boards is not feasible, Karnataka can institute a moderation mechanism. For instance, during the SSLC, have an external moderation of question papers and evaluation standards to ensure they are on par with CBSE/ICSE rigor (not excessively difficult or out-of-scope). Another approach is to allow State Board students an option to take certain standardized tests (on NCERT content) and use those scores for admission into higher secondary courses, just as CBSE students use their board exam scores. This way, a state-board student with strong abilities isn't penalized by a lower scoring scale. In the long run, exploring the possibility of a common/state-wide board exam (as suggested in NEP 2020) could be beneficial – where an exam like a state CET at Grade 10 evaluates all students uniformly. Under RTE, the state must also ensure that resources (quality textbooks, teacher support) are equitably distributed; thus, state board schools should receive upgraded materials and training to meet the NCERT standards that private CBSE/ICSE schools already use.
- **RTE Seat Parity:** Even though RTE is amended in Karnataka, the government should monitor that RTE quota students admitted to private schools (whether state, CBSE or ICSE) are not subject to fundamentally different academic expectations than their peers. Currently, many economically disadvantaged students attend private CBSE/ICSE schools under the 25% RTE reservation. They often flourish due to the quality of materials and teaching. The goal should be that an RTE student in a government or aided school following the state syllabus receives an education of comparable quality. By aligning Karnataka's curriculum and exam standards with national ones, we honor the RTE promise that all children will have access to a "full time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality." Parity in standards will also facilitate mobility – if a student transfers from a state board school to a CBSE school or vice versa, the learning continuity should be smooth, without major gaps or repeats. Ensuring parity among boards will not only uphold students' rights but also improve Karnataka's overall educational outcomes. It will make our education system more coherent and fair, easing the current public perception that CBSE/ICSE are inherently superior. In a state that values social justice, achieving academic parity is a crucial step toward equal opportunity.

Competency-Based Dual-Level Examinations in Math and Science

- One innovative reform to reduce student stress and failure rates – without diluting academic standards – is to introduce competency-based dual-level examinations for difficult subjects like Mathematics and Science. The concept, rooted in the National Focus Group on Examination Reforms (NCF 2005), is that boards can offer two versions of an exam: one standard (advanced) and one basic, allowing students to choose based on their aptitude and future plans **(CBSE to introduce two levels of Mathematics for All India Secondary School Examination)**. The rationale is straightforward: not all students need the same depth of mathematics or science for success in life, especially if they intend to pursue non-STEM fields. By tailoring the exam difficulty, we can ensure that essential competencies are tested for all, while advanced problem-solving is tested only for those who opt in.
- Evidence of Success (CBSE's Example): CBSE introduced two levels of Mathematics examination for Class X from the 2020 board exams onwards, implementing this very idea **(CBSE to introduce two levels of Mathematics for All India Secondary School Examination)**. Students could choose between Mathematics-Standard (the usual level, required if they plan to take math in higher secondary) and Mathematics-Basic (an easier level, for those who do not wish to continue with math after class 10). Importantly, the syllabus and classroom teaching remained the same for all; the differentiation was only in the difficulty of the board exam questions and evaluation **(CBSE to introduce two levels of Mathematics for All India Secondary School Examination)**. The NCF 2005 panel had predicted multiple benefits from such a system: catering to different kinds of learners, lowering overall stress, and particularly reducing fear of the “hard” subjects that often cause students to fail or drop out **(CBSE to introduce two levels of Mathematics for All India Secondary School Examination)**. Initial reports from CBSE indicate that this reform has indeed been well-received – more students attempted the math exam with confidence, and the pass percentage in math improved without any erosion of learning outcomes (since those who wanted to pursue science/commerce streams still took the standard paper).

Competency-Based Dual-Level Examinations in Math and Science

- **Proposal for Karnataka:** Karnataka can adopt a similar dual-track examination for SSLC Mathematics and Science (e.g. Science-Standard and Science-Basic). By offering a Basic Level exam, we give an opportunity for academically weaker students or those not inclined towards science/math in the future to still earn their SSLC without undue stress, focusing on core competencies. The Standard Level exam would be optional for students aiming for science-intensive studies (like Science stream in PUC or engineering later), and it would test higher-order problem-solving and application. All students would study the full curriculum during the year, but at exam time they have a choice as per their comfort and aspirations. This model is competency-based because the Basic exam will be designed to assess fundamental understanding and skills (ensuring every student achieves a minimum proficiency in math/science), whereas the Standard exam can assess more advanced competencies.

Expected benefits of dual-level exams include:

- **Reduced Dropout Rate:** One of the major reasons for dropouts at the secondary level is repeated failure in one or two subjects (often Math or Science). By allowing students an easier pathway to clear these subjects, we can keep them in school. A student who passes with a basic level math or science can still enroll in many higher secondary courses (except those requiring advanced math/science) or vocational streams, rather than having no SSLC certificate at all. This directly supports the goal of universal secondary education.
- **Lower Stress, Better Learning:** Knowing that an easier option is available, students may feel less exam anxiety and thus perform better. It also encourages teachers to ensure at least the basic syllabus is thoroughly taught to everyone. Meanwhile, advanced students won't be held back – they can challenge themselves with the standard paper. Overall, teaching can be more targeted to student needs, and classroom heterogeneity in aptitude can be managed better when the stakes are differentiated.

Competency-Based Dual-Level Examinations in Math and Science

- ✦ **Alignment with National Policy:** This reform would be in line with NCF 2005 recommendations and the direction of new policies like NEP 2020, which advocates for flexible assessments and reducing high-stakes exam pressure. Karnataka would be following the footsteps of CBSE's proven initiative, possibly even extending the concept further. (CBSE has so far implemented dual levels in Math; Karnataka could become a trailblazer by doing so in Science as well, setting an example for a holistic approach to student-centric assessment.) ✦

Implementing dual-level exams will require careful planning – including syllabus continuity (the curriculum remains common until the exam), counselor guidance for students on which level to choose, and clear communication that the SSLC certificate remains the same (perhaps with a notation of Basic/Standard in that subject). The state examination board (KSEAB) can pilot this reform in a limited way (for example, offer Basic Math option in the first year, then scale up and add Science Basic next year based on feedback). Over time, this flexibility can be expanded to other subjects as needed (for instance, an advanced level English for those aiming for literature). The overarching aim is to test competencies, not trap students – every student should have the chance to demonstrate what they have learned without being overwhelmed by an all-or-nothing exam format.





Impact of the No Detention Policy on Learning Outcomes



ASER Reports: The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2014 indicated that less than 50% of Class V students in government schools could read a Class II textbook, and over 40% of students in Classes II and III could not recognize numbers up to 100.

National Achievement Surveys: These surveys revealed a decline in student performance as they progressed through grades, with average scores dropping significantly from Class III to Class VIII.

Research Studies: A study titled "Social Promotion and Learning Outcomes: Evidence from India" found that the NDP led to a significant decline in learning outcomes, particularly in districts with higher initial repetition rates.

Policy Amendments and State Implementations

In response to the challenges posed by the NDP, the Indian Parliament passed the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (Amendment) Act in 2019, Section 16, allowing states to reintroduce examinations and detain students in Classes V and VIII if they failed to meet academic standards.

As of December 2024, the implementation status across states is as follows:

States that have implemented the amendment (allowing detention): Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, Delhi, and Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu.

States continuing with the No Detention Policy: Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Manipur, Mizoram, Odisha, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Chandigarh, Ladakh, and Lakshadweep.

»»+ Impact of the No Detention Policy +««

Policy on Learning Outcomes

Recommendations for Karnataka: ✦

Given the evidence and national trends, it is imperative for Karnataka to reassess its stance on the No Detention Policy:

Reevaluate the NDP: Consider the reintroduction of examinations in Classes V and VIII to ensure students meet essential learning milestones.

Implement Remedial Measures: Before detaining students, provide additional instructional support and re-examination opportunities, as mandated by the 2019 amendment.

Strengthen Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE): Enhance the effectiveness of CCE to monitor student progress and identify learning gaps early.

Teacher Training: Invest in professional development programs to equip teachers with strategies to support diverse learners and address varied learning needs.

Community Engagement: Involve parents and local communities in the educational process to foster a supportive learning environment.



»»Urgency of Reforms and Previous»» Recommendations

These recommended reforms – from revising curriculum in early grades to overhauling SSLC exam patterns – are not without precedent. Education experts and stakeholders in Karnataka have been voicing concerns and proposing changes for several years. Notably, a Round Table Conference on Education Reform organized in July 2024 (with participation from the **Karnataka Associated Managements of Schools (KAMS)** and academics like **Dr. H. S. Ganesh Bhatta**) strongly highlighted the issues discussed above and urged the government to act swiftly. Some of the key recommendations from that forum and other expert committees include:

- **Bringing SSLC Pass Criteria in line with National Boards:** It was pointed out that there is no defensible rationale for Karnataka to stick to a 35% separate pass mark when 33% overall is the accepted norm nationally. Adopting the 33% pass mark (with combined internal and external scores) would immediately relieve thousands of students without compromising standards (Annexure 1.). The Department was urged to make this change before the next academic year results, to ensure Karnataka's students are not unfairly filtered out. Indeed, as an illustrative example, if internal assessment scores were counted, a student with 15/20 internal and 20/80 external would have 35/100 and be deemed successful (Annexure 1.) – a scenario currently not recognized in our system but standard in CBSE/ICSE. This simple policy shift requires only an executive decision and alignment of KSEAB rules, and could raise our pass percentage to near parity with other states (without resorting to grace marks).



»»⊕ Urgency of Reforms and Previous ⊕«« Recommendations

- **Textbook[★] Revision and Review:** The need to revisit the 2017 textbook[★] revisions was emphasized, using the NCERT review findings as a guide. The state textbook committee should immediately begin work on removing overly advanced content and incorporating age-appropriate, activity-based learning material. Especially for Science and Math in Classes 6-8, the content load must be reduced and aligned with cognitive levels (e.g., complex chemistry and physics concepts can be deferred to high school, while middle school focuses on basics and hands-on experiments). The conference recommended constituting subject-wise panels (including NCERT experts, experienced state school teachers, and child psychologists) to audit each textbook for compliance with NCF 2005 and the upcoming NCF 2020. The goal would be to roll out improved textbooks for the next academic cycle, at least for critical subjects. It was also recommended to involve practising teachers in this process to ensure that the material is teachable within real classroom constraints and that it builds on what students actually learn at earlier stages.
- **Comprehensive Early Education Reform Program:** The urgency to start reforms at the primary level (rather than focusing only on Class 10) was a recurring theme. Suggestions were made for a mission-mode program to strengthen foundational learning – possibly dovetailing with Government of India's NIPUN Bharat (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) and similar schemes. By Grade 3, all children should attain basic literacy and numeracy; by Grade 5, they should be comfortable with the learning approach used in NCERT materials. Achieving this might require bridging courses for students and re-training for teachers who have so far been accustomed to the older state syllabus. The experts argued that without fixing the pipeline of learning, any exam reform at the end will only be a band-aid.

»»⊕ Urgency of Reforms and Previous ⊕«« Recommendations

- Forming a High-Level Committee for SSLC Reform: It was proposed that a high-level committee be established to oversee the SSLC exam reforms in totality (Annexure 1.). This committee should include officials from the Education Department and KSEAB, representatives from CBSE/ICSE schools in Karnataka, educational researchers, and senior teachers/principals. The mandate would be to review the SSLC examination system holistically – including the question paper design, marking scheme, use of internal assessments, language of question papers, etc. – and recommend a roadmap to modernize it. The inclusion of members from different boards would facilitate cross-sharing of best practices. For instance, CBSE's move to competency-based questions and ICSE's project work components could inform Karnataka's reforms. The committee can also monitor implementation of changes like the dual-level exams, ensuring that the intended objectives (stress reduction, fairness) are being met.

In light of these discussions and recommendations, it is clear that the time for incremental or delayed action is over. The Government of Karnataka is urged to treat this as a top priority policy intervention. The future of lakhs of students each year is at stake – students who are our state's human capital. Swift, bold reforms based on evidence and expert advice will not only boost student success rates but also enhance the credibility of our state education system.





Actionable Policy Recommendations



- Based on the analysis above, the following concrete actions are proposed for the government's immediate consideration:
- **Align SSLC Pass Criteria with National Boards:** Issue a government order revising the SSLC passing rule to 33% aggregate marks in each subject (including internal assessment) instead of the current 35% in the board exam alone. This brings Karnataka on par with CBSE/ICSE standards (**Annexure 1.**) and is a low-hanging fruit for instant impact on student outcomes.
- **Count Internal Assessments Toward Final Result:** Modify KSEAB regulations so that the 20 marks of internal assessment in each subject are factored into the pass/fail determination. For example, a student scoring 25/80 external and 15/20 internal (40/100 total) would be declared passed. This change incentivizes continuous learning and acknowledges co-curricular skills, aligning with the holistic approach of CCE and national boards (**Annexure 1.**).
- **Reduce First Language Paper Weightage:** Standardize the mark distribution of the first language paper to 100 marks (from 125) to eliminate the unique disadvantage currently faced by Karnataka students. The syllabus can be adjusted accordingly. This will streamline the assessment load and avoid confusion, bringing the language paper in line with other subjects and other states.
- **Overhaul State Textbooks (Phase-wise):** Instruct DSERT and the Karnataka Textbook Society to urgently collaborate with NCERT for a phase-wise textbook overhaul. Priority should be given to Science and Mathematics textbooks of Classes 1–8, followed by Social Sciences and Languages. Set a timeline (e.g., new textbooks for Grades 1-3 and 6 by next academic year, and so forth) to gradually implement NCERT-aligned, age-appropriate content. Until new textbooks are ready, issue supplementary guidance to teachers highlighting portions of the current books that may be skipped or taught in a simplified manner (as per NCERT guidelines) to avoid overloading students.



Actionable Policy Recommendations



- **Teacher Capacity Building:** Launch a crash training program for in-service teachers on the new approaches – possibly during school vacation periods – focusing on activity-based learning, continuous assessment, and differentiation of instruction to handle mixed-ability classrooms. Utilize DIETs (District Institutes of Education and Training) and senior mentor teachers for this purpose. Also, develop resource portals where teachers can access NCERT lesson plans, exemplar problems, and pedagogical tips to complement the revised curriculum.
- **Establish an SSLC Reform Task Force:** Constitute the recommended high-level committee/task-force on SSLC exam reform (**Annexure 1.**) with a clear mandate and deadline (for example, to submit a reform blueprint within 6 months). This task force should particularly flesh out the implementation details of introducing dual-level exams in Mathematics (and Science), reforms in question paper design (to include more competency and application-based questions rather than rote-based questions), and integration of internal assessments (projects, practicals) in the final score. The task force should also set targets like improving the SSLC pass percentage to above 90% within 3 years (without grace marks), and monitor progress annually.

Pilot Dual-Level Exams: Direct KSEAB to design a pilot for Mathematics-Basic and Mathematics-Standard in the next SSLC exam cycle, drawing on CBSE's 2020 model (**CBSE to introduce two levels of Mathematics for All India Secondary School Examination**). Develop separate question banks for the two levels under a common syllabus. Simultaneously, begin curriculum work for a similar Basic/Standard option in General Science. Announce these options well in advance to students/parents (perhaps from the start of the academic year) and provide counseling on the implications of each choice (e.g., a Basic level pass in Math is sufficient for arts/humanities in PUC but not for science stream). Use the pilot results to make adjustments and scale up the dual exam offering in subsequent years.



Actionable Policy Recommendations



- **Ensure Board Parity Measures:** Mandate that all schools (regardless of board) undertake baseline and endline assessments based on the common learning outcomes defined by NCERT for key stages (say, Grades 5, 8, and 10). The state can develop these tests and make them optional but incentivize state board schools to participate to measure themselves against a national yardstick. Additionally, consider setting up a State Academic Standards Council that continuously reviews whether the state syllabus and exams are keeping up with CBSE/ICSE/NCERT standards – this council can recommend course-corrections annually, ensuring we never again drift into isolation in curriculum standards.
- **Leverage Central Schemes and Funds:** Many of these reforms can be supported by central government initiatives (Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan funds can be used for teacher training and textbook development; NCERT's guidance under the new National Curriculum Framework implementation, etc.). Karnataka should proactively seek technical support from NCERT and perhaps become an early adopter of the forthcoming National Curriculum Framework for School Education (2024) at least for primary grades, which will automatically ensure parity with other boards.
- **Communication and Change Management:** Formulate a communication strategy to explain these changes to all stakeholders – parents, teachers, students, and school management. The success of policy reform lies in public acceptance. Emphasise that these measures will raise the quality of education while reducing undue stress and failure. Early wins (like improved pass rates without grace marks, better learning levels in lower grades) should be publicised to build momentum and support.

Conclusion

Karnataka stands at a critical juncture in its educational journey. The challenges observed in the recent SSLC results are symptomatic of systemic gaps in curriculum alignment, examination policy, foundational literacy, and learning assessments. At the heart of these issues lies the prolonged impact of the No Detention Policy (Section 16 of the RTE Act, 2009), which while intended to promote inclusivity, has over time undermined academic seriousness and accountability from Grades Pre-Primary - 1 to 8.

With no provision for holding back or remedial correction, learning gaps have accumulated unchecked, leaving students ill-equipped to cope with the academic rigour of secondary education. This has directly contributed to declining performance, rising exam anxiety, and dependence on artificial pass mechanisms like excessive grace marks.



Conclusion

The 2019 Amendment to the RTE Act, which permits examination-based retention after a second attempt, offers a balanced alternative. Several progressive states have already implemented this provision. Karnataka must now urgently follow suit and link this reform with:

- Early foundational assessments,
- Minimum learning outcome benchmarks,
- Structured academic support,
- And stronger curriculum standards aligned with NCERT's age-appropriate frameworks.

At the secondary level, Karnataka must also standardise its SSLC framework to ensure parity with CBSE, ICSE, and other state boards. This includes:

- Adjusting pass criteria to national norms (33% total with internal + external),
- Introducing competency-based assessments in math and science,
- Redesigning textbooks to meet age and grade-level cognitive standards (as already flagged by the 2017 NCERT Textbook Review Panel),
- And ensuring bilingual or accessible exam formats to ease Transition for rural and regional-medium students.



The Way Forward



Our recommendations aim to create a more equitable, accountable, and high-quality education system in Karnataka that fulfils both constitutional mandates and national benchmarks. By aligning examination policy, curriculum content, and pedagogical practices, we can reverse the current cycle of low achievement and high stress.

The Government of Karnataka is urged to treat this policy memorandum with urgency. Many of these reforms are already enshrined in central guidelines or have been implemented successfully in other states. What is needed now is political will and administrative resolve.

If implemented in earnest, these reforms will lead to:

- Higher secondary school completion rates,
- Stronger foundational learning from early grades,
- Reduced dropouts in Grades 9 and 10,
- And a level playing field for Karnataka's children, regardless of board affiliation.

Karnataka has historically been a pioneer in Indian education. With these forward-looking changes, it can reclaim that mantle and set a national example once again.



»»» The Way Forward «««

The time to act is now – so that the SSLC batch of 2025 and beyond can experience a fairer, stronger, and truly empowering education.

★ Action Plan ★

The evidence is clear: Karnataka's current SSLC examination framework, pass criteria, and curriculum design place its students at a systemic disadvantage compared to their peers in national and neighbouring state boards. This inequity is not only academic but also a matter of social justice under the Right to Education (RTE) Act.

Further, the long-standing implementation of the No Detention Policy (NDP) under RTE Section 16 has led to serious erosion in foundational learning. Reports by ASER, NAS, and independent academic studies confirm that large numbers of students advance to higher grades without mastering even basic competencies. Karnataka's continued adherence to the pre-2019 NDP, despite the national amendment allowing states to detain underperforming students post-assessment and remediation, risks deepening the learning crisis. This has a cascading effect on secondary education, manifesting in low SSLC pass rates, inflated reliance on grace marks, and dropouts due to academic unpreparedness.



Action Plan



Key Initiatives for the 2025-26 Academic Year

The urgent need, therefore, is for a comprehensive and integrated policy reform that bridges assessment standards with learning outcomes, creates parity across school boards, supports inclusive education, and lays a strong foundation from the early grades onward.

SI No	Action Area	Key Initiative	Time Line	Responsibility
1.	SSLC Pass Reform	Reduce pass marks to 33%, count internal assessment (20/100)	Immediate (Govt. Order before July 2025)	KSEAB / Dept. of School Education
2.	Textbook Realignment	Phase-wise revision of textbooks Grades 1-8 using NCERT/NCF 2005-2024 guidance	Phase I by April 2026	DSERT + Karnataka Textbook Society
3.	Curriculum Alignment	Implement NCERT-aligned syllabus for Grades 1-5 (backward design from Grade 10 outcomes)	Start rollout 2025-26	DSERT
4.	Dual-Level Exams	Introduce Basic/Standard levels for Math (SSLC 2026), pilot Science (2027)	Announce in 2025-26	KSEAB / SSLC Reform Task Force



SI No	Action Area	Key Initiative	Time Line	Responsibility
5.	RTE Section 16 Implementation	Implement 2019 RTE Amendment: Reintroduce exams in Classes 5 & 8 with remedial options	2025–26	Govt. of Karnataka + Legislature
6.	Parity Across Boards	Develop Common Learning Outcomes and Moderation Benchmarks	2025–26	DSERT + Karnataka Textbook Society
7.	Teacher Development	Launch statewide NCERT-based pedagogy and subject training through DIETs	Start 2025	DSERT / RMSA / SSA Karnataka
8.	Public Engagement	Media campaign on changes, benefits, and results of reforms	2025	Dept. of Education + DIPR
9.	External Support	Seek NCERT and Central Govt. assistance under NIPUN Bharat, Samagra Shiksha	Ongoing	Education Dept. Karnataka
10.	Evaluation & Monitoring	Annual Learning Outcome Review and Reform Status Reports	Start 2026	Independent Academic Review Board

References / Annexures:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1tpy_EeCBJUplCRkd-VvLMr3yL2ALquFQ?usp=sharing



Final Words



Karnataka must not allow rigid legacy systems and policy inertia to hinder the future of its students. A learning-centric, equitable, and evidence-informed reform package – as presented in this memorandum – is not merely desirable but essential. Aligning with national practices will strengthen the credibility of the Karnataka State Board, empower teachers with clearer goals, reduce dropout and failure rates, and restore public confidence in the government’s commitment to quality education.

Let Karnataka lead the next era of school reform – grounded in justice, equity, and academic excellence.



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