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## 1. School enrolment down by 1 crore from 2018-19 level: the report, reasons given

### Introduction



The Ministry of Education has recently released two Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) reports — for 2022-23 and 2023-24 — that show a drop of over a crore in school enrolment from the average enrolment figure from 2018-19 to 2021-22.

UDISE+ is a database on school education from the pre-primary to higher secondary levels. The Ministry of Education maintains the UDISE+ online platform, through which data on school education is collected from the states. It prepares the report based on this data on parameters like school enrolment, infrastructure, and teachers. This data is key while allocating funds for schemes like PM-POSHAN (midday meals), Samagra Shiksha, and scholarships.

### What do the two new UDISE+ reports say about enrolment?

Enrolment in schools across the country remained above 26 crore from 2018-19 to 2021-22, showing increases of a few lakh students each year except for the COVID year of 2020-21, when there was a slight drop. This figure fell in 2022-23 to 25.17 crore. It dropped further to 24.8 crore in 2023-24.

### What accounts for the drop in enrollment?

Officials in the Ministry of Education have maintained that the drop in school enrolment does not necessarily mean that more children are now out of school. Instead, they have pointed to a "major departure" in how data was collected for the two new reports as the reason for the fall.

For past years' reports, data was collected school-wise, which means that each school would upload details on how many children are in a class, how many boys and girls etc. In contrast, from 2022-23 onwards, data is being collected student-wise, which means that details of each student — their name, address, parents' name, Aadhaar details — is being entered into the UDISE+ system. A senior official said this is likely to have weeded out "ghost" students — students who may have enrolled both in a government and a private school in order to draw government benefits.

The schools enter the details, and officials said this data is verified at the level of a school cluster, and at the district and State levels. Bihar has seen the sharpest drop of 35.65 lakh in 2023-24 enrolment from 2018-19, followed by UP with a drop of 28.26 lakh. A senior official in the Ministry said that the data in the report was arrived at after “engagement” with the states — states that showed large changes from previous years were asked to verify their data.

### **Why was the change in method introduced?**

In the new system, data of over 60 items is collected for each student. In addition to details like parents’ name, address, Aadhaar, height, and weight, it also covers the student’s exam result and attendance for the year.

The official said that with this, UDISE+ has become “a more accurate registry”. The Ministry has attributed the change in data collection to a recommendation in the National Education Policy 2020, which aims “to achieve universal participation in school by carefully tracking students, as well as their learning levels”. The details that are now being collected for each student are expected to help track their performance and attendance.

The new system also includes a registry for teachers with a profile for each teacher. Officials said this is also expected to help deploy teachers suitably, and track their attendance. There were around 98 lakh teachers in 2023-24.

### **When was UDISE launched?**

UDISE was launched in 2012-13 by merging information management systems in place separately for elementary education and secondary education. UDISE was then being managed by the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, which functioned under the Centre. Each school would enter school-wise data on enrolment, infrastructure, and teachers, manually on paper. This would then be computerised at the block or district level, and collected at the state level before it was shared with the Centre.

From 2018-19 onwards, UDISE became UDISE+, and has since then been directly monitored by the Ministry of Education. With this, schools are required to upload their data online on the UDISE+ platform. It provided for offline filling-in of data in remote areas, but even this would have to be uploaded online at the block level. This also helped maintain a record of those responsible for filling in the data, ensuring better accountability.

It is this system that has now been developed further to include details of each student. UDISE+ collects information from all recognised schools — government, government aided, private and others — from pre-primary to Class 12. This was a total of around 14.72 lakh schools in 2023-24. Each school is assigned a UDISE+ code as an identifier. With the new system, a unique educational ID has also been created for each student on the portal.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics

Source: Indian Express

## **2. What is the US Presidential Medal of Freedom, awarded to Messi, George Soros and Hillary Clinton?**

## Introduction

US President Joe Biden recognised the contributions of 19 public figures in politics, entertainment, sports and more through a ceremony at the White House for awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The honorees included some of the Democratic Party's "best-known leaders and boosters: Hillary Clinton, philanthropist and major Democratic donor George Soros, and Robert F. Kennedy, who was given the recognition posthumously." Others included Argentinian footballer Lionel Messi, anthropologist Jane Goodall and actor Denzel Washington. Messi was unable to attend due to scheduling conflicts.

What is the significance of this award and who decides its recipients? We explain.

## What is the US Presidential Medal of Freedom?

The Presidential Medal of Freedom is the United States' highest civilian honour, often given in recognition of a body of work over a person's lifetime.

A Congressional Research Service report from November 2024 says it was created by President Harry S. Truman (1945 to 1953) in 1945. Later re-named by President John F Kennedy in 1963, it allows the President to recognise "any person who has made an especially meritorious contribution to (1) the security or national interests of the United States, or (2) world peace, or (3) cultural or other significant public or private endeavors."

The medal itself has a white star over a red pentagon, surrounded by five gold eagles. At its centre is a blue circle with 13 gold stars.



## Who gives out the Presidential Medal of Freedom?

The award is broad in scope and the qualifications required to receive it. The CRS report says, "There is no formal procedure for nominating and selecting recipients of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The President has wide latitude under Executive Order 11515 (March 13, 1970) to award the medal to 'any person recommended to the President for award of the Medal or any person selected by the President upon his own initiative.'"

At times, members of the US Congress have sent letters of recommendation for the award.

## What is the basis for these choices?

The report adds that the selections of the awardees often reflect the US President's political and personal interests. In Biden's case, his list has been interpreted as support for the political and cultural establishment of the country at present, something incoming President Donald Trump has often rallied against. Notably, apart from Democratic party members and supporters, Biden also awarded Republican leader Mitt Romney, who contested and lost the 2012 presidential elections against Barack Obama. Romney has been critical of Trump in recent years.

During Trump's first presidential term beginning in 2017, awardees included the late Supreme Court judge Antonin Scalia who was seen as a staunch conservative, longtime Republican senator Orrin Hatch and music legend Elvis Presley.

Other notable recipients over the years are talk show host Oprah Winfrey, billionaire and former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, civil rights activist Rosa Parks, and boxing legend Muhammad Ali.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Source: Indian Express

### 3. Why Punjab's arhtiyas are demanding for national-level extension of Punjab Agricultural Produce Markets Act

#### Introduction



Punjab's arhtiyas (those who facilitate the transaction between a farmer and actual buyer) have asked the state government to push for the adoption of the Punjab Agricultural Produce Markets Act, 1961, as a national model for agricultural marketing.

#### What are the key features of the Act?

The Act operates under strong state regulation, requiring farmers to sell their produce through government-controlled mandis primarily. These markets are supported by fixed market fees (market development Fund) which fund infrastructure and ensure transparency and development of market infrastructure through committee. While private markets are allowed, they operate under strict government licensing.

It emphasises mechanisms to secure fair remuneration for produce, creating efficient marketing systems to improve farmers' incomes. It protects the interest of small and marginal farmers. The Act allows direct marketing through registered entities, enabling farmers to sell beyond traditional mandis and access diversified markets, including private buyers. Private market yards are permitted under government licensing, and dispute resolution mechanisms are in place. The well-established network of mandis and traditional storage facilities underpins the state's agricultural marketing system, ensuring reliable support for marketing and storage needs.

#### Why are arhtiyas concerned regarding NPFAM?

They fear the new framework could weaken Punjab's established system. The draft NPFAM emphasises deregulation and flexibility, allowing farmers to sell to private buyers and on digital e-trading platforms, alongside Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs). It promotes public-private partnership, and private investment in market infrastructure, such as silos and cold storages, with fewer regulatory restrictions with simplified licensing across states.

The policy proposes exemptions from market fees for private facilities, which could undermine the existing mandi infrastructure.

Ravinder Singh Cheema, president of the Punjab Arhtiyas Association, told The Indian Express, "The framework proposes changes like promoting private silos and exempting certain facilities from market fees, which could harm the state's infrastructure."

He added that NPFAM favours big private players and corporate houses, and it might allow large corporations to bypass traditional markets, creating monopolies and sidelining farmers.

### **Why do farmers and arhtiyas oppose private silo storage in Punjab?**

Farmers argue that private silos mainly store wheat, creating problems for other crops such as paddy. They also claim that the state's existing facilities are adequate for managing primary crops, including wheat and paddy.

According to farmers, there is a risk of monopoly as allowing private silos to operate outside agricultural marketing laws could lead to corporate control and reduce options.

### **What are the other points of contention?**

There would be a huge loss of revenue as well. Exempting private silos, cold storage, and private yards from market fees could undermine the funding needed to maintain Punjab's strong mandi system which will further weaken the infrastructure.

While the framework claims to foster innovation and competition, we fear it could lead to corporate dominance and marginalise small farmers, making equitable market access challenging. Arhtiyas believe Punjab's Act safeguards farmers' interests effectively and should serve as a model for the entire country. They fear that the National Policy Framework could harm farmers and prioritize corporate interests over public welfare.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express