



DR. DHIR JHINGRAN ON TRANSFORMING FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING IN INDIA

Kaushal Kumar | The CEO Magazine

As Founding Director of the Language and Learning Foundation (LLF), Dr. Dhir Jhingran has been at the forefront of tackling India's foundational learning crisis. In this conversation with The CEO Magazine, he discusses the urgent need for strong FLN, LLF's large-scale impact, and the role of corporate India in shaping the nation's future.

TCM: Foundational learning is often described as a crisis in India. In what ways is the lack of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) holding us back as a nation, and what might be the long-term social and economic consequences of not addressing it urgently?

Dr. Dhir: Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) is the basis of all future learning. FLN skills are referred to as the ability of children to read with fluency and comprehension, express themselves orally and in writing, and do basic mathematical operations. The National Education Policy 2020 recognises that everything else we build in the education system will be irrelevant unless foundational skills are strong.

Neglecting FLN has high costs. Studies suggest that universal FLN can add up to 7% to India's GDP and ₹4,000 crore annually to national income. More importantly, it's an equity issue. Children from marginalised communities who lag in early grades often never catch up. With 85% of brain development occurring before the age of 8, the early years are critical. If we get FLN right, we unlock possibilities across gender equality, employability, and civic participation.

TCM: India's private sector has played a catalytic role in advancing many national causes. How can this role be extended to improving FLN outcomes in the country?

Dr. Dhir: The private sector has been instrumental in driving impact in public health and skilling, and its



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involvement in early education is growing. Contributions to teacher training, classroom resources, and monitoring systems are already showing results in learning outcomes. Take the example of the Development Impact Bond in Haryana, implemented with CSR support. We achieved 3.5 times the learning gains compared to the predefined targets. This demonstrated how, with the right support, government systems can work more effectively and efficiently. With sustained investment, our literacy levels can increase from the current 55% to less than 25% within a few.

TCM: LLF currently reaches over 16 million children and aims for 60 million. What does it take to drive meaningful impact at that scale, and what are the biggest roadblocks you face?

Dr. Dhir: It is important to remember that nearly 70% of the 4.3 crore children in foundational grades are in government schools. Many of them come from Dalit, Adivasi, and low-income families. So when we talk about improving foundational learning, we're really talking about them.

Large-scale change is only possible by working closely with governments. There are challenges, of course. The system is stretched, overloaded with programmes, and lacking both reliable data and a culture of using it to improve teaching and learning.

Therefore, our focus has been to work to strengthen the system across state, district, and block levels, and to provide support in making meaningful changes inside classrooms.

TCM: What makes LLF's model different from conventional education interventions, and how do you ensure that the impact is scalable?

Dr. Dhir: Sustainably changing entrenched teaching practices at scale is never easy. Our focus is to move classrooms away from rote memorisation and choral repetition toward approaches that build reasoning, creativity, and deeper thinking.

What makes our model different is that we work entirely within the government system. We do not run parallel programmes; instead, we strengthen system capacity and commitment to deliver high-quality FLN at scale.

Our biggest strength is our team. They bring diverse expertise in foundational learning and years of experience working with government systems, all driven by a strong belief in educational equity.

TCM: Your programs have undergone rigorous third-party evaluations. What have the data and field assessments revealed about actual learning outcomes and systemic improvements?

Dr. Dhir: At LLF, we place a strong emphasis on outcomes. Most of our programs undergo independent third-party evaluations to ensure accountability.

The results, so far, have been very encouraging. For example, in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, we saw commendable gains. Literacy competencies improved by 2.1 times,

moving from 31% to 66%. Numeracy competencies also saw a significant rise, increasing from 34% to 74%. We take these findings seriously and use them to improve our work. Alongside external evaluations, we also run a robust internal monitoring system that tracks progress regularly and helps us course-correct when needed.

TCM: Equity is a central pillar of LLF's work, especially for tribal, rural, and linguistically marginalised children. Why is this lens critical to solving India's education crisis at its root?

Dr. Dhir: While national surveys suggest that learning levels are improving overall, what often gets missed is the high levels of disparity within classrooms and across schools. Our field studies show that in almost every classroom, 15 to 20 percent of children are learning very little. These children are predominantly from Adivasi families, low-income communities, or those whose home language differs from the language used in school.

We focus on narrowing these gaps, or "raising the floor." This means helping teachers identify and support struggling learners, using remedial teaching, and bridging the home-school language divide through multilingual strategies. We work extensively in aspirational districts, i.e., areas that have low indicators of human development, because unless the bottom quartile improves, we cannot say we are reaching every child.

TCM: With policy support through NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat already in place, what will it truly take to transform foundational learning across India in the next five years, and what role must corporate leaders play in that journey?

Dr. Dhir: We're at a very propitious moment. The NEP 2020 has placed FLN at the core of the education agenda, and the NIPUN Bharat Mission has given it a national framework with measurable goals. This is the time to build on that momentum.

The government is increasingly open to working with non-profits to improve learning outcomes. Corporate leaders are being encouraged to contribute not just funding, but also strategic insight, innovation, and long-term partnerships.

This is a historic moment for corporate India to invest in the country's future. Foundational learning is the first step in building human capital; it's where tomorrow's problem-solvers, citizens, and entrepreneurs begin. By supporting this, corporate leaders can play a powerful role in nation-building.