Focus on Educating Children Below Six

The government's focus on improving outcomes in education — learning at school and research in universities — is welcome. Budget 2018 attempts to put in place the necessary conditions to make good on this focus. The real test of the government's intent is the work programme and implementation strategy.

Integrating early childhood education with schools will positively impact learning outcomes, as borne out by the work of academics such as Raj Chetty. But the task of effecting this integration is tricky. Pre-nursery or early childhood education is handled by the ministry of women and child development (WCD), school education by the ministry of human resource development (HRD). The two ministries must prepare a time-bound plan for a sustainable, viable shift in educating children below 6. Significant brain development takes place, via both nutrition and brain stimulation, up to age 3 as well. This, too, must be taken on by a major reorientation of the WCD ministry, reworking the role of Anganwadi workers. The HRD ministry has to develop age-appropriate curriculum, hire teachers and provide proper training. Besides the efforts at the Centre, this integration will require administrative realignment at the state and district levels. These are major challenges.

The idea of district-wise strategy to improve learning outcomes sounds good on paper. The focus must be on balancing decentralisation with a need for a common core that will allow for mobility of students through the system. The National Assessment Survey must provide a more granular picture of the education outcomes map rather than just cover more ground. The focus on teacher training is welcome, as is the effort to embrace the digital revolution. Creating a monolith out of pre-nursery to Class 12 might not be the way to go, however.