

Secondary School Dropout Prevention in Tribal Odisha — Catching the Fall Before It Happens

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Education

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These are not abstract statistics. They represent the point in an adolescent's life — Class 9 or Class 10, between 14 and 16 years of age — where a combination of learning failure, economic pressure, family expectation, cultural friction with the school environment, and the absence of any adult who is paying specific attention to them produces a decision that will shape the rest of their life.

Why Secondary Dropout Is Different from Primary Dropout

Understanding this distinction matters because interventions designed for primary retention — mid-day meals, enrolment drives, free uniforms — do not address secondary dropout. The causes are structurally different.

The learning poverty trap. A student who reached Class 8 without being able to read a Class 5 text or do Class 4 maths — a result of the foundational learning failure documented in the Education Sector Primer — arrives at secondary school structurally unable to engage with Class 9 content. The curriculum gap is not bridgeable without intensive remedial support that the government secondary school does not provide. Failure is predictable. Dropout is the predictable response to sustained, visible failure.

A PLOS One longitudinal study on school dropout determinants in India (2023) found that students who entered secondary school with low foundational skills were among the highest-risk dropout candidates. The risk was compounded for students from low-income tribal families where income pressure created a cost-opportunity calculation: staying in school for a qualification that may not arrive vs. beginning wage labour immediately.

Economic pressure intensifies at secondary. In tribal districts, adolescents aged 14–16 can earn meaningful wages in agricultural labour, brick kilns, or construction. The economic pressure that was present at primary level intensifies as the potential earnings grow. A student who is failing Class 9 and can earn ₹300 per day at a construction site is making a rational calculation, not an irrational one. Without addressing the economic constraint — through scholarships, through family income support, through MGNREGS ensuring parents don't need their child's income — the calculation will often come out against school.

Social and cultural distance from school. The secondary school curriculum, taught in Odia or sometimes English, covering subjects designed primarily for students from non-tribal, higher-literacy backgrounds, creates a cultural distance that doesn't exist for students whose home environment matches the school's cultural frame. Tribal students in secondary school are navigating not just academic content but an institutional culture that does not reflect their own. Teachers who do not know their students' communities, who use examples and references that mean nothing in a tribal context, and who may have low expectations for tribal students create an environment where belonging is hard to feel.

Early marriage for girls. The longitudinal study found that family conflict and early marriage pressure were significant predictors of secondary dropout for girls. The Samata intervention RCT in Karnataka — testing a structural and norms-based programme working with adolescent SC/ST girls, their families, communities, and schools to address poverty, schooling quality, and gender norms — found no overall

impact in one district but significant improvement in school entry and completion in the other. The finding that is most important: even in the better-performing district, "a substantial proportion of SC/ST girls remain at-risk of early marriage and school drop-out and require targeted programming" — indicating that universal government programmes are insufficient for the most marginalised.

What the Evidence Supports: A Multi-Level Framework

The research on dropout prevention consistently shows that single-level interventions — scholarships alone, or counselling alone, or community awareness alone — produce limited effect. The most durable dropout prevention works at three levels simultaneously: the student, the school, and the community.

At the student level: academic support and mentoring

The most evidence-backed student-level intervention for secondary dropout prevention is structured mentoring: a consistent, trusted adult relationship with an adolescent student who is at risk of dropping out. A J-PAL evaluation of life skills training and mentoring to reduce school dropout among girls in India found the intervention successful in developing stronger life skills including increased agency, more equitable gender norms, and stronger socio-emotional support — all factors that strengthen retention.

The mentoring relationship works through several mechanisms: it provides early warning of crisis (a mentor knows when a student is struggling before the school does); it provides practical support for navigating the school system (understanding scholarship applications, exam preparation, addressing bullying or teacher conflict); and it provides a model of a life in which secondary and higher education led somewhere meaningful — which is not visible to most tribal adolescents from within their own community.

Practical mentoring design for tribal contexts:

- Mentors should ideally be from the same community or from comparable tribal backgrounds — not educated outsiders imposing aspirations from outside the community's frame of reference
- One mentor per 8–12 students is the maximum that produces genuine relationship rather than administrative contact
- Monthly minimum contact, with the capacity to respond rapidly when the student or family is in crisis
- Mentors need training in: active listening; recognising signs of dropout risk; navigating scholarship and entitlement schemes; referral to counselling or legal support if child marriage pressure is occurring

Academic remediation specifically for secondary students: Students entering Class 9 with significant learning gaps need structured, after-school or weekend support on foundational content — not Class 9 content, but the Class 5–7 content they never mastered. This is TaRL methodology adapted for older students. The materials and approach need age-appropriate framing — a 15-year-old working on fraction problems needs the dignity of not feeling like a child — but the diagnostic-grouping-level-appropriate-instruction logic is the same.

At the school level: tracking and early warning

The most actionable school-level intervention is the simplest: someone is specifically tracking at-risk students and responding when warning signs appear. The UDISE+ system tracks enrolment and dropout at the school level; it does not track which students, within a school, are showing early signs of disengagement. That tracking requires a person at the school who is paying attention.

What an early warning system looks like:

- Monthly attendance tracking for every student — not just aggregate attendance, but which students specifically are missing more than 3 days per

month

- A meeting between the class teacher and these specific students — not a punitive conversation, but a "what's happening for you?" conversation
- Engagement with parents when attendance drops below 80% in any month — not a disciplinary letter, but a visit or phone call expressing concern and asking what support the family needs
- A clear escalation pathway when attendance patterns don't improve: to the school principal, to the Block Education Officer, and to any NGO or community organisation with a mentoring relationship with the student

This system requires that someone has the mandate and the time to do it. In most government secondary schools, that person doesn't exist unless an NGO creates the role: a trained community education volunteer, or a school coordinator funded through CSR or government education scheme convergence, whose specific job is tracking at-risk students.

The National Means-cum-Merit Scholarship Scheme (NMMSS): This scheme provides ₹12,000 annually to economically weaker students to prevent dropout after Class 8. Around 2,50,089 students received it in 2023–24, with ₹300.10 crore expenditure. The evidence on NMMSS is that scholarship support is effective — students who receive it have meaningfully better retention rates. The gap is enrolment: tribal students who qualify often don't apply because they don't know the scheme exists or cannot navigate the application. NGO role: systematic awareness and application support for NMMSS and pre-matric scholarships in every secondary school in operational blocks.

At the community level: norm change and economic support

Child marriage prevention as a dropout prevention strategy. For tribal girls in Odisha, early marriage is the single largest structural driver of secondary dropout for girls. Every NGO working on secondary retention for girls must also be working — through VLCPC activation, community awareness, and legal rights information — on

child marriage prevention. These are not separate programmes. They are the same programme.

MGNREGS as education support. In households where a student's income is needed, MGNREGS wage employment for adult household members reduces the pressure on the student. This requires ensuring household MGNREGS entitlements are fully accessed (see Entitlements Mapping Practice Note) and that MGNREGS work scheduling — where gram sabhas have PESA authority — is arranged to avoid competing with school examination seasons.

Community school governance engagement. School Management Committees (covered in the SMC Activation Practice Note) are mandated institutions for community oversight of secondary schools. An active SMC that tracks dropout and engages with the Block Education Officer when a pattern is emerging creates community accountability for retention that no external programme can substitute.

The Transition Moments: Where NGO Focus Is Highest-Leverage

Three transition moments produce disproportionate dropout risk and deserve specific programme attention:

Class 8 to Class 9: The shift from government upper primary to secondary school often involves changing schools — and losing the peer relationships and institutional familiarity that protected against dropout. Students who were just managing at the upper primary level face new, harder content, new social environments, and often a longer commute. Pre-transition mentoring — introducing students to their secondary school, connecting them with older students from their community already in Class 9 or 10, and ensuring scholarship applications are submitted before the new school year begins — significantly improves Class 9 retention.

Class 9 to Class 10: The year before the Class 10 board examination is the highest-risk dropout year for students who have accumulated learning gaps. The prospect of failing a high-stakes examination is a powerful disincentive to continue. Remedial support for Class 10 examination preparation — not by teaching the Class 10 curriculum, but by addressing the foundational gaps that prevent engagement with it — is the intervention with the highest immediate impact.

Class 10 to Class 11: Students who complete Class 10 face a second transition, to higher secondary. The KGBV residential schools (for girls) and EMRS (for ST students) are government resources that absorb some of this transition risk. But waiting lists are long, distances are significant, and families who need income often prefer students to begin earning immediately. Scholarship awareness, application support, and mentoring through the 10-to-11 transition significantly improve higher secondary enrolment rates.

Government Scheme Navigation for Secondary Retention

NMMSS: ₹12,000 per year for meritorious economically weaker students in Class 9–12. State selection test in Class 8. NGO role: awareness, exam preparation support, application facilitation.

Pre-matric Scholarship for SC/ST: Central government scholarships for ST/SC students in Class 9–10 from families with income below ₹2.5 lakh annually. NGO role: awareness, income certificate support, application facilitation. Systematic tracking of whether enrolled students are receiving payments.

Post-matric Scholarship for ST/SC: For Class 11 and beyond. Significantly improves transition to higher secondary. Same facilitation role as pre-matric.

Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS): Government residential secondary schools for ST students in high-PVTG blocks. 11 fully functional in Odisha. NGO role:

community awareness of admissions processes, support for families with application and transport logistics.

KGBV (Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya): Residential schools for girls from SC/ST/OBC communities at Class 6. Fills at the upper primary transition but creates the pipeline for better secondary retention among girls who complete residential upper primary education.

Samagra Shiksha: The national school improvement scheme funds school infrastructure, teacher training, and girls' hostels at secondary level. NGO role: advocacy for Samagra Shiksha investment in specific high-dropout secondary schools through Block Education Officer engagement.

What Success Looks Like at 24 Months

A well-designed secondary dropout prevention programme with NGO facilitation should, at 24 months, demonstrate:

- Documented baseline and endpoint retention rates for Class 9 and 10 students in target schools
- At least 80% of eligible students in target schools enrolled in NMMSS or pre-matric scholarship
- Monthly attendance tracked for every student; at-risk students identified and receiving mentoring contact
- Zero child marriages among programme participants (or significantly below district average)
- Class 10 board examination pass rates for tribal students tracked and compared to district average

The goal is not 100% retention — some dropout is driven by factors no programme can address. The goal is a measurable reduction, particularly at the Class 8–9 and Class 9–10 transitions, in the specific communities where the NGO is working.

Related Knowledge Commons content: Education Sector Primer (Sector 04) · Practice Note: Teaching at the Right Level — foundational learning failure as the root of secondary dropout · Practice Note: VLCPC Activation — child marriage prevention as dropout prevention · Practice Note: Entitlements Mapping — scholarship access

Evidence Grade: B — Multi-study. This Practice Note draws on UDISE+ 2024-25 analysis (Education for All in India), the PLOS One longitudinal dropout determinants study (2023), the Samata intervention RCT (PMC 2019), the J-PAL life skills and mentoring evaluation, Ministry of Education NMMSS data (2024-25), and Odisha-specific dropout data from the School and Mass Education Department. Last reviewed: April 2026.

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