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A STUDY ON SCHOOL DROPOUTS IN MEGHALAYA

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A Study on School Dropouts in Meghalaya

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Foreword

The discourse of implementing the New Education Policy has delved into much concern and contemplation in school drop-out rates. The phenomenon of students disengaging from formal education before completing their studies is a multifaceted issue with individual, academic, and socio-economic factors, leading to profound implications for individuals, families, and society as a whole. **This paper, “A Study on School-Dropouts in Meghalaya,”** delves into this critical subject with depth and field rigor that is both empirical and has normative ideas of prescriptive suggestions from field evaluations.

The journey to understanding why students leave school prematurely is complex, intersecting with various socioeconomic, cultural, and personal factors. This study stands out in its meticulous approach through various layers of fieldwork investigation, stakeholder consultation, ministerial-level meetings, and student, parent, and teacher-focused interview groups throughout the state of Meghalaya. The paper does not only provide statistics but also the human accounts behind the numbers. It offers a balanced analysis, combining empirical research with poignant narratives that bring the data to life.

Through these pages, the reader will encounter various data points that showcase the current condition of the state in terms of accessing quality education under SGD-4, they also hold account for students, educators, parents, and policymakers from the Directorate of School Education, School teachers, and Directorate of Education Research & Training each contributing to a richer understanding of the drop-out crisis. The authors- Minnette Ireen Passah, Akho Phira, & Arjoma Moulick have dedicated months towards capturing these diverse perspectives to ensure that the study is comprehensive and have tried to avoid the oversimplifications that often surround the discourse of drop-out.

One of the compelling aspects of this paper is its focus on solutions which are divided under Individual, Academic, and Socio-Economic Factors at each level through Lower Primary, Upper Primary & Secondary. Thus, rather than merely diagnosing the problem into a single category, the authors have tried to explore innovative strategies and interventions with dedicated segment recommendations that can be taken up by policymakers.

This study stands to be a crucial resource. It challenges the state to look beyond the surface, question its assumptions, and consider the broader societal context in which education takes place.

It is with great respect and a sense of urgency that we introduce our work. “A Study on School-Dropout in Meghalaya” is not just an academic contribution but a call to collective responsibility. By understanding the factors that lead to school drop-out and by implementing the solutions proposed, we can move closer to an education system that truly serves all students in the future.



Dr. Minnette Ireen Passah

State Lead- Meghalaya

19th June 2024

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Abstract

Quality Education is essential for human development. At present, Meghalaya has taken various initiatives to reduce dropouts but the fragmented efforts have not been able to reduce the dropout rate to a considerable extent. This led the state to rank third amongst states with the highest dropout at the secondary level. The main aim of this study is to map the efforts of the state government in tackling the dropout issues and also have a grounded understanding of the reasons behind the high dropout rate in various districts of the state. The field findings report which are pertinent to the study are categorized into individual factors, academic factors and socio-economic factors. Moreover, the recommendations are aimed to inform the Government of Meghalaya to address the problem and reduce the dropout rate.

Keywords: Dropout, NEP 2020, Reduction, Interventions.

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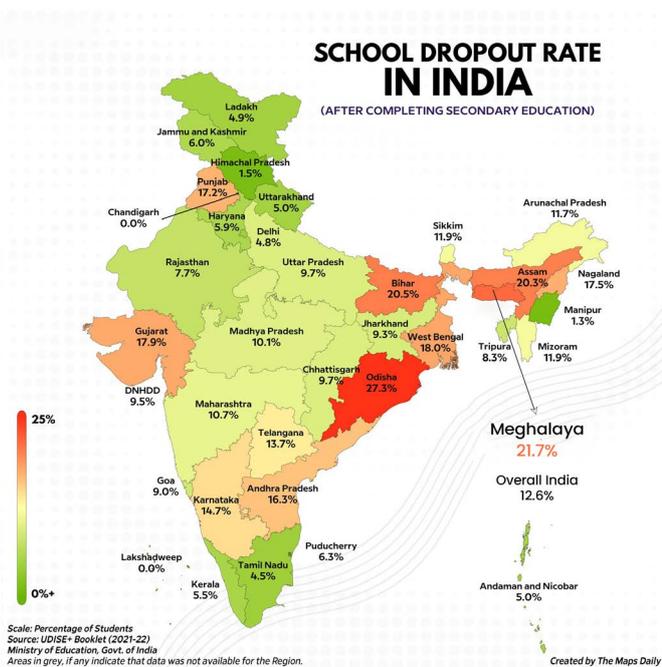
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Abbreviations

UNDP	- United National Development Programmes
UNICEF	- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UDISE	- Unified Digital Information on School Education
NEP	- National Education Policy
GER	- Gross Enrolment Ratio
ASER	- Annual Status of Education Report SDG - Sustainable Development Goal OoSC - Out of School Center
ODL	- Open and Distance Learning
NIOS	- National Institute of Open Schooling
MDM	- Mid-Day Meal
TLM	- Teacher Learning Material
PAB	- Project Approval Board
CCE	- Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation
SMC	- School Management Committee
SHG	- Self-Help Group
NGO	- Non-Governmental Organization
BRC	- Block Resource Coordinator
CRP	- Cluster Resource Person
STEM	- Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics
MoE	- Ministry of Education
DSEL	- Directorate of School Education and Literacy
SIMS	- School Information Management System
SDMIS	- Student Database Management Information System
DSEO	- District School Education Officer
SDSEO	- Sub Divisional School Education Office
AWC	- Anganwadi Center
VSK	- Vidya Sameeksha Kendra
ICT	- Information and Communications Technology
MMR	- Mothers' Mortality Rate

I. Introduction

In Today's time, access to quality education is the road towards development. Consequently, various nations of the world including India are taking different measures to enhance the quality of education. Multiple pol programs programmes have been modified from time to time and even new ones have been introduced. As per the United National Development Programmes (UNDP), the Global Human Development Index report 2021 which was cited in the 2022-23 economic surveys, the mean years of schooling in India stands at 6.7 years. As per the Unified Digital Information on School Education (UDISE) plus data 2021-22, there are about 265 million students enrolled in schools across India, but estimates suggest more than 3.5 million students have dropped out after class 10 in the academic year 2021-22. With this perhaps in mind, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 looked specifically at a very prominent issue—the high dropout rate of school students—which, despite the best efforts of the government, shows a concerning trend¹. Despite dropout being one of the biggest problems faced by the education sector, addressing it is far more difficult.



Meghalaya is no exception to this. While the Government of Meghalaya has taken various initiatives to tackle dropout in the schools, the State recorded the highest dropout rate in all levels with 9.8% at the Lower Primary level, 9.4% at the upper primary Level, and the secondary level 21.7% way higher than the national average of 1.5%, 3.0% and 12.60% respectively². Of serious concern is the fact that the average dropout rate at elementary and secondary levels, year on year, has increased, as seen in Table 1 below:

Year	Primary %		Upper Primary %		Secondary %	
	State	National	State	National	State	National
2021-22	9.8	1.5	9.4	3.0	21.7	12.60
2020-21	7.4	0.8	8.9	1.9	27.9	14.6
2019-20	7.0	1.5	8.0	2.6	22.2	16.1

1 India Today.
2 UDISE 2021-22

While the overall dropout picture is grim, the situation is far worse in some districts with alarming rates of dropout. The Secondary school level drop-out rate of 27.6% is particularly critical in 6 districts, with the average being more than 30%³. This led the State to rank third among the highest dropout rates at the secondary level. Table 2 below shows the dropout rate district-wise in Meghalaya:

District	Lower Primary	Upper Primary	Secondary
West Garo Hills	11.05	9.06	25.70
East Garo Hills	12.24	13.32	21.88
South Garo Hills	14.05	13.19	37.14
West Khasi Hills	9.59	14.32	24.34
Ri-Bhoi	8.53	11.64	22.55
East Khasi Hills	6.07	7.57	9.39
West Jaintia Hills	8.90	11.71	16.12
North Garo Hills	13.07	11.29	34.09
East Jaintia Hills	10.66	14.13	27.83
South West Khasi Hills	14.30	12.49	30.86
South West Garo Hills	11.96	9.38	44.86

Achieving a 100% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) from preschool through secondary school by 2030 is a key target of the National Education Policy of India, 2020 (NEP). It envisages universal access, no dropout, and 100% retention in schools for every child. However, the school enrolment in the state across various strata (Government, Private, other) and those not in school across all age groups according to ASER (table below) provides a grim picture where, in the age of 6-14 collectively, 2.8% of students have never joined school or have permanently dropped out. Further among the age of 7-16, 3.6% are not in school⁴.

Age Group Gender Wise	Govt	Pvt	Other	Not in School
Age 6-14: All	43.7	53.2	0.3	2.8
Age 7-16: All	44.0	52.0	0.4	3.6
Age 7-10: All	42.4	55.4	0.3	1.9
Age 11-14: All	45.9	50.7	0.3	3.1
Age 15-16: All	42.9	46.7	1.1	9.3

Source: ASER Rural Report 2022

Nonetheless, India and Meghalaya State are committed to achieving UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), including achieving SDG 4 – Quality Education. The Niti Aayog SDG Report ranks Meghalaya at 23 with a composite score of 60, an improvement from the score of 48 the previous year. While the state is a top performer in SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality) with an index score of 88, on SDG 4 (Quality of Education) its performance has shown negative growth by -7 points. Meghalaya's score has been

3 PAB Meghalaya, Ministry of Education, Govt. of India, 2023-24, pp.7

4 ASER Rural Report, 2022 https://img.asercentre.org/docs/ASER%202022%20report%20pdfs/State%20pages/6%20pages_English/meghalaya_16.pdf

reduced from 55 (2019-20) to 48 (2020-21). It is a matter of concern that Meghalaya is one of the states states⁵. The researchers therefore felt the need to study the reasons behind dropout hiero and that its findings and recommendations can help combat the issue.

II. Review of Related Literature

Literature Review encompasses a comprehensive examination of the various studies across the world on the issue of dropouts. The authors also summarized the various challenges and potential solutions. School dropouts represent only a subset of those outside the school system, emphasizing the need to recognize the multifaceted nature of the dropout issue and its connection to broader social contexts (Porteus, K, et.al, 2000 Rumberger, R.K, 2001). Various studies reveal many interrelated challenges influenced by a complex array of factors.

Poverty has emerged as the predominant primary and contributing factor leading to children dropping out of school (Poets, K, etal., 2000; Sharma, U and Olivia, Ng, 2000 and Kumar, P, et., al, 2003) often compelling children to engage in child labor or economic activities (Garg, et.al., 2003 and Harim, A.H.M.Z, 2003), parents and caregivers struggling to cover the cost of education, including fees, shoes, uniform, transportation (Portues,K, et.al., 2000 and Sharma, U, and Olivia, Ng 2000).

School Related Barriers such as low quality of education, lack of teacher training, poor teaching-learning transactions, and poor infrastructures are the challenges faced by government schools in tackling higher dropout as compared to private schools (Sharma, U and Olivia, Ng 2000; Garg, et., al, 2003). Within schools, teacher quality, instructional strategies, and resource availability—such as libraries, laboratories, and technology—significantly impact student interest in learning and engagement which is another major contributor to the high rate of dropout (David, 2014; Kapur, 2018; Sharma, U and Olivia, Ng 2000 and Patidar, 2023).

Other factors common across studies are teachers' attitudes; school distance; absence of aid to secondary level; lack of upper primary, secondary, and higher secondary schools, dropout centers, morning and night schools in the rural areas; absenteeism; absence of co-curricular activities; failure in examination; teenage pregnancies; household responsibilities such as taking care of the younger siblings, helping in farming, etc.

"Improving Education Quality in South Asia(I)- A review of UNICEF Effort" in 2018 presents a global perspective on the issue of dropouts, shedding light on the prevailing challenges and potential solutions. Major challenges that were accounted for by UNICEF were the high number of teacher vacancies remaining at all levels and simultaneously affects on the teaching and learning quality and challenges faced in educational governance and teacher management. Affirming the solutions, UNICEF noted that solutions like Government ownership having accountability systems needs to be developed at the district. The Government has been in the front seat driving every phase of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the initiative. The paper also highlights empowering teachers as the drivers of change whereby a teacher is entrusted with the responsibility for bringing change and coming up their own solutions, and at the same time monitored to ensure that the changes happen. UNICEF further pointed out the need



for Local empowerment of schools and communities which are a key driver for success viz by treating the school as the unit of change, empowering local actors to come up with local solutions to local barriers for universalization of quality learning.

Given the extensive nature of similarity between hill states of Meghalaya with various other hill countries like Nepal, Sumon Kamal Tuladhar's study is useful to look at (2004). He highlighted how Nepal Government successfully implemented a non-formal education system that offers an alternative to the formal education system, which has proven to be one of the strongest Out Of out-of-school children programmes. The program offers basic education for school-aged children who lack access to formal education, or cannot afford full-time schooling, or have dropped out of formal education. It operates in two levels: Level I focuses on literacy, numeracy, and basic skills for 8-14-year-old dropouts, and Level II targets students in Grades 3, 4, or 5 who can rejoin formal schooling upon graduation.

III. Need for the Study

After an extensive literature review the researchers in the present study divided the variables into 3 categories such as Individual factor, Academic factor and Socio-Economic factors. On one hand while there is a broad understanding of the reasons for dropout, on the other there are very few comprehensive strategic steps spelt out that are required to be taken at a systemic level to address the issue of high dropouts. NEP 2020 proposes two overall initiatives to address dropout:

- I. Bring dropout children back to school and prevent further dropping out by ensuring effective infrastructure, regular trained teachers, conveyance, hostels, upgrading government schools, building quality schools, setting up innovative centers, and mainstreaming migrant and Out of School Children (OoSC);
- II. Achieve universal participation in school by systematic tracking of students' enrolment, learning levels and ensuing opportunities to catch up through - counselors, social workers, local language-trained teachers, and community engagement for teaching support, career guidance and mentorship; expanding

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programs, strengthening the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and State Open Schools for primary and secondary education.

This study is directed towards unearthing the qualitative understanding of the contributing factors that lead a child to dropout at Lower Primary, Upper Primary and Secondary level of Schooling and how to tackle them at the State, School and Community level. And at the same time be expected to support the Government of Meghalaya in its efforts towards dealing with high dropout rate in the States.

IV. Objective of the Study

Taking into cognisance of the efforts by the Department of School Education towards tackling the high-dropout rate at schools in Meghalaya, the study aims to pursue an in-depth examination of the drop-out factors divided into sections viz. Lower Primary, Upper Primary and Secondary. Further, the study endeavors to provide curated solutions for all categories of school with the end goal of supporting the state agency to take appropriate measures and influence policies in addressing school drop-out issues.

V. Research Methodology

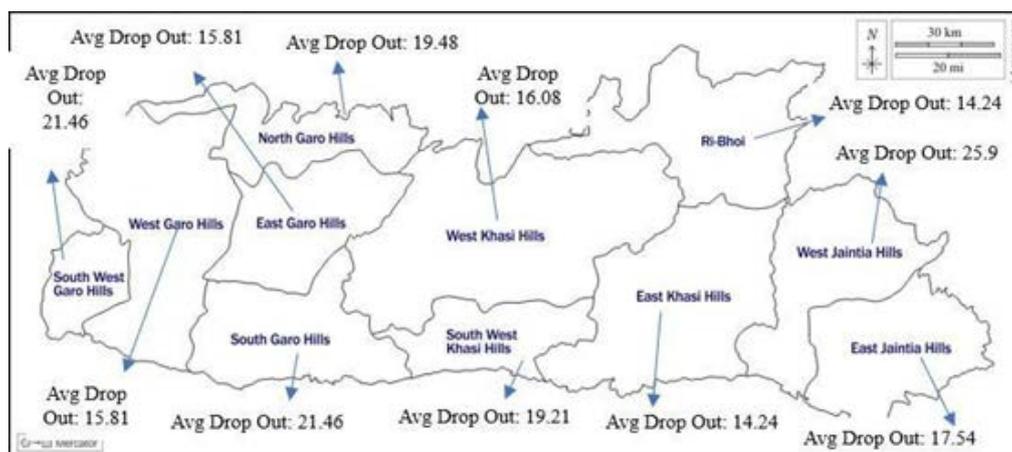
Following are the steps which the researchers utilized in order to achieve the aim and objectives of the study in a systematic and logical manner

1. Sample for the Study

Upon careful analysis of UDISE Data 2021-22, the researchers carried out extensive field visits to 8 Districts out of 12 Districts of Meghalaya viz West Garo Hills District, South West Garo Hills District, North Garo Hills District, West Jaintia Hills District, South West Khasi Hills District, Eastern West Khasi Hills District, East Khasi Hills District and Ri Bhoi District. In total covering 13 Blocks, 24 Villages and 38 Schools to ensure coverage of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo region of the state with highest dropout at the 3 levels of schooling.

The study has been divided into two parts:

1. The first part is a face-to-face unstructured interview schedule with the Out of School State Coordinator, District School Education Officer, and Sub District School Education Officer to understand the various efforts taken by the Government and different stakeholders in connection to drop out.
2. The second part is the target respondents comprised of Head Teachers, Teachers, Students, Out-of-School Volunteers, and Block Resource Coordinators from the above-mentioned number of Block, Villages, and Schools.



2. Tools

For data collection, a semi-structured interview schedule was employed by the researchers where the respondents were asked to rate the reasons for dropout on three major factors ie., Individual factors, Academic factors, and Socio-Economic Factors. Several open-ended questions were also included to gain a deeper understanding and to capture the different perspectives of the underlying problem under study.

3. Delimitation of the Study

The study was delimited to Eight (8) Districts and thirteen (13) Blocks due to time constraints.

4. Definition of the term used

Dropout- A student who has stopped attending school.

VI. Analysis and Interpretation Data

Part I:

On interviewing the different target groups handling dropout at the state and district level under the department of School Education we can point out that the Government of Meghalaya has been implementing several initiatives to address dropout in the schools. The efforts are highlighted as under:

1. Free entitlements like textbooks, uniforms, and Mid Day Meals (MDM) & TLMS;
2. Community awareness campaigns, through Roadshows, Newspapers, radio programs on 93.5 Red FM, South Asia FM Ltd., etc.
3. Student enrollment drives as part of the celebration of World Literacy Day;
4. Collaboration with NGOs for reaching street/ slum children, etc.
5. Conduct of annual household survey for identification of Out of School Children (OoSC) and facilitating them to join the 317 Special Training Centers (STC- 6 to 15 years) and NIOS special Centers (16-19 years), to undergo special modules to catch up and mainstreaming them if they clear the examinations.

Hence, it can be seen that the impact of the above initiatives in reducing the dropout rate has been limited. This can be supported from the PAB 2024-25 where the State was asked to take adequate measures to reduce the Dropout Rate and improve retention rate⁶. For instance, the NIOS Centres were concentrated only in 5 Districts with 42 Centers and were absent from Districts having high dropout rate at the secondary level. Further, the Special Training Centres and the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) pathways to enroll and mainstream OoSC have not been effective as seen in the Table below. Attendance is poor/ irregular, due to inadequate monitoring.

Year	Special Training Centre (Elementary)		NIOS Training Center (Secondary) in 5 districts	
	Mainstreamed	Target	Enrolled	Target
2021-22	1104 (13%)	8155	42 (2%)	1811
2022-23	1931 (23%)	8468	0	1340

Despite the government's efforts and initiatives to bring back students into the system, certain factors such as limited funds, delay, and meager honorariums for dropout volunteers, have become a hurdle in the process. Currently, there are 370 Special Training Centres in Meghalaya spread across all District of Meghalaya

Furthermore, field visit observations reaffirm that high dropout remains a common phenomenon, and concerns are also expressed about the quality of UDISE data in the State. It is possible that the dropout rate could be high due to gaps in the collection and validation of UDISE data. Evidence shows that private and aided school managements do not upload correct/ complete enrolment data. Consequently, it is possible that the overall education statistics of the state do not reflect the real or correct picture of dropout. The

need for improved data quality is highlighted by the Ministry of Education, Government of India in PAB 2023- 2024, Meghalaya.

Another reason which contributes to faulty reporting is the absence of a known definition of dropout which has also led to varied understanding among different stakeholders. Further, the findings of the study from the interview with different heads reveal that there is very little or no effort at all from the side of the teachers and School Management Committee to monitor or track dropouts in the school and follow up with parents of vulnerable children. The participation and contribution of the community in addressing such a grim challenge is also missing.

Part II

Through the responses obtained, interpretation of data was done based on ranking of the different core factors under three variables under study at the Lower Primary, Upper Primary and Secondary section emerged as important contributors to the decision to drop as discussed below:

Lower Primary Section:

- 1. Individual factors-** Among the individual factors, the major reason that arose from the study is the lack of interest of children in attending school. The prevailing socio-cultural landscape and the overall environment at school contain several anomalies and aberrations that can lead to this factor. Adding to this, the schools under study reveal that the overage of the children due to failure, and joining school late is also a factor for children to drop out. Additionally, after COVID-19, most families migrated from one district to another in search of new employment, leading children to drop out of school. While ideally, this should lead to students enrolling at a new school after migrating with their families, a lack of information on the RTE rules regarding transfer certificates leads to students dropping out of school. Besides, there is no formal system to track the children of parents who migrate to other districts/states. Another factor revealed by a few head teachers that led to children dropping out of school is the poor health condition of the child.
- 2. Academic Factors-** Schools under the study are grappling with major problems of teacher inadequacy and non-uniform distribution of teachers. Though schools in Meghalaya have a favorable pupil-teacher ratio, the number of teachers does not necessarily align with the number of grades and enrolment at the school. In many cases, due to fewer classrooms, the teachers have to club classes together and this directly leads to the problem of rote learning, self-study, divided attention, and less focus on the foundational stage. Further, a few head teachers pointed out that they face difficulties in teaching the students due to the lack of qualified staff. In the context of this factor, an inadequate number of teachers, unqualified and untrained teachers leads to poor quality of teaching and disjoints the children's ability to cope in academics.

Socio-Economic factors- Among the socio-economic factors, a significant proportion of parents covered under the study were wage laborers. Though they may have the desire to help their children study, they are unable to do so. Additionally, their demanding jobs do not leave time to check their children's homework, pay attention to how the child is studying in school, or actively engage in the child's educational activity. In a few cases, due to the low educational status of the parents or illiterate parents, the lack of academic support at home led to children not being able to cope at school and therefore contributed to dropout. The study reveals that in rural areas of Meghalaya, agriculture and daily wage laborers being the main occupations of the people, and the large family size has a direct impact on children's disengagement from academic activities and eventually dropping out from schools. Due to parental preoccupation with income

generation activities, there is a dependency on the eldest children to assist with various household tasks like collecting firewood, grazing cattle, and caring for younger siblings. Lower primary children have to drop out as their parents do not have time to drop and pick them up from school due to their engagement in occupational activities to earn their livelihood.

Upper Primary Section:

- 1. Individual factors:** Lack of interest in study among the students at the Upper Primary level was the key factor for students dropping out at school. At the individual level, household chores, sibling care, and peer pressure were found to induce children to drop out as they lost interest in attending school. The child's disinterest coupled with the low value attached to education by some families end up for parents believing that the school is not adding any value to the child's future and hence prefer to remove them from school. On a different note, in a few schools it was shared by the teachers that after the introduction of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), students do not take school seriously because the common perception about CCE is 'no examination'. This was cited as another reason by the teachers why children fail numerous times which eventually leads to them dropping out.
- 2. Academic factors:** At the school level, teachers' low teaching-learning transactions, and non-engaging curriculum due to the absence of a laboratory, library, etc were revealed to contribute to children developing a disinterest in attending school. Based on the study, poor infrastructure such as not having separate toilets for boys and girls, water connection, and inadequate classrooms, among others were some of the reasons leading to students dropping out. Very importantly, a weak foundation of students is also a contributor leading to failing multiple times consecutively in one class. One of the reasons for a lack of initiative from teachers, principals, and SMCs to hold regular Parent Teachers meetings, never visit households, and follow up, especially among those students who frequently have been absent from school is another contributing factor to drop out. A striking finding from the study revealed that the transition from Lower Primary to Upper Primary poses a difficult phase for the students due to the medium of instruction and learning from mother tongue - Khasi & Garo to English which impacts the learning outcomes.
- 3. Socio-Economic factors:** As cited from the findings of Lower Primary section, parents are dependent on daily labor activities with minimum wage which restricts their spending on children's education. To aggravate the situation, big family size with multiple young children adds to the problem, whereby older siblings drop out of schools as they are expected to engage in helping the parents in the fields or tending to the younger siblings. The study also found that, in the absence of health facilities in the rural villages, pregnant mothers resort to home delivery through the help of traditional health attendants/ quacks. This practice also stands out as an important factor as it not only poses a threat to increase Mothers' Mortality Rate (MMR) but also increases risks to the other children in the family in deprivation of nutrition and appropriate child-care services.

Secondary Section:

- 1. Individual factors:** According to the study, the findings at the Secondary section leading to drop-out becomes more varied. As the students grow older, it is evident to observe the trend of eloping, teen marriages and peer pressure as they enter adolescent stage. Lack of interest and motivation to pursue further studies, dislike of school experience and health issues are some of the individual factors which add

up to students dropping out at the Secondary level. With the increased interest and abilities to undertake earning activities, adolescents become prone to dropping out of school. Another factor that results in students dropping out from schools is failure in one particular class multiple times.

2. **Academic factors:** Children having to move from a rural school to secondary section in townships are often teased, bullied or discriminated against for not being able to understand and speak English properly. And hence teachers are sometimes unaware of the seriousness of the problem within their classrooms, which ultimately led students to prefer to bunk classes and eventually drop out. Teachers' attitude is directly linked to students dropping out of schools. Some students pointed out that they dislike schools as teachers tend to show favoritism against certain students and a negative attitude towards them. Apart from not having adequate infrastructure viz. Classrooms, separate bathrooms, water facilities, etc, one of the chief obstructions is not having hostel facilities at the Secondary Schools which aggravates the hardships of the students especially those coming from far-flung and remote villages. The absence of morning or night shifts, open schooling centers, special dropout centers in high dropout districts and blocks is another major factor for children to drop out at the secondary level, especially among those children who are interested in studies but are unable to continue their schooling as they have to support the family in earning.
3. **Socio-Economic factors:** One major finding in connection to socio-economic factors is the non-availability of an adequate number of Government secondary schools in the villages which becomes a costlier affair for a low-income family to send their children to school in different blocks or districts and hence prefer to remove them from schooling and put them to work to support family earnings. Parents who send their children to school so that they can build a better future for themselves are less vulnerable to dropping out of the formal schooling system. However, if their parents perceive that the schooling system is not helping the children in realizing that better future or that the children are not progressing well against this goal, these children prefer to drop out of school as they earn a better wage. Another factors which was witnessed during the study was the stopping of aid just at the upper primary sections as per RTE Act 2009, is another contributing factor for students to drop out from schools as secondary section becomes an additional burden to low income parents especially with large family size to purchase uniforms, textbooks, paying of high school fee charge by private schools and absence of school transport and transportation fees because of far distant from school, etc. are all contributing factors which led student to dropout.

Based on the above analyzed data, it can be pointed out that the findings of the study is in line with almost all of the above related literature. For instance, Shahidul, H.M and Karim, Z (2015) Kumar,P, et.al., (2003) in their study highlighted poverty, supporting families in earnings, low level of education of parents, early marriage, peer pressure, school cost, household work, absence of co-curricular activities and lack of interest in study. Interesting findings from the study of dropout in Meghalaya such as lack of interest, unqualified inservice teachers, and insufficient support from parents, teachers and school among others are also the factors which are at play for contributing to students' failure at the secondary school leaving certificate examination. This is similar to what is pointed out by then Union Minister for Education, Dharmendra Pradhan⁷. Teacher absenteeism and proxy teachers can be another contributing factor that leads to children being disinterested from school across the three levels of schooling. This can be supported by what has been stated in the PAB 2024-25 "As per the 3rd CS Conference

7 <http://bestcolleges.indiatoday.in>

to address the issue of proxy teachers and teacher absenteeism, the State was urged to ensure that photographs of all the teachers are displayed and updated in all schools. State was requested to display/update all the photos on or before 31st May,2024”⁸.

VII. Insights

The insights from field observation indicate that high dropout rates in schools in Meghalaya are a result of various interconnected factors, including socio-economic, academic, and administrative factors including: (i) large family size and sibling care of the younger children; (ii) lack of parental awareness resulting in prioritizing childcare and farming over education (iii) poor infrastructure and a lack of affordability for students residing in remote habitations; (iv) never enrolled CwD due to inadequate interventions for inclusive education and infrastructure (ramps, toilets); (v) late schooling, lack of interest and motivation, overage factors affect individual choices in returning to school; and (vi) teenage pregnancy or eloping is a minor secondary reason.

The academic and school related reasons are (i) poor school infrastructure; (ii) inefficient supply chains (books, uniforms, etc); (iii) inefficient teacher deployment; (iv) unqualified and untrained teachers and consequent poor teaching practices; (v) and inadequate teaching learning material (TLM) to engage the students; (vi) transition from Khasi/ Garo to English after Grade 5; (vii) poor foundational learning leading to students struggling to cope up at upper primary and secondary level or failing and reluctance to return to school; and (viii) inadequate monitoring systems and poor community engagement. The concentration of secondary schools at the Block and Town level, distance and lack of affordability are also factors that result in dropout of students coming from remote villages.

In summary, systematic, well targeted and intense efforts need to be undertaken by the School Education Department, GoM, in collaboration with other Government departments, NGOs, SMCs, and community members to prevent dropout of students in schools. One-on-one campaigns, fragmented efforts and activities will have only limited impact and will not achieve the expected outcomes in reducing the high dropout rates in Meghalaya. Zero tolerance to drop out should be the single message that must go down from the Hon'ble Chief Minister and Hon'ble Education Minister to the Village Council Chairman level. Administrative machinery should be capacitated to ensure regular and effective monitoring and tracking of students (enrolment, attendance, and assessment), community involvement for monitoring and remedial teaching (Self Help Groups, Village Councils, etc). Periodical third party impact evaluation/ assessment of dropout interventions and activities will alert the system to ensure reduction in dropout and overall better outcomes.

VIII. Recommendations

There is a need for a proactive and comprehensive approach by different government departments and agencies, schools, and communities for reducing school dropouts. The specific interventions recommended at the policy/state level and field level are:

A. State or Policy level interventions to reduce dropout

- 1. Target critical districts and areas with the highest school drop-out rate** by providing additional resources and continuous and effective tracking to bring down the average rates for the State. By utilizing geospatial techniques it is possible to identify geographic distribution/variation and hotspots of dropouts in primary, upper primary and secondary levels at district and sub district levels. Findings of such studies to improve the current policies, develop and implement cost-effective strategies in hotspot regions to reduce dropouts in Meghalaya. In some districts migration may be a reason and needs to be addressed appropriately by ensuring that children continue schooling.
- 2. Foster systematic & well monitored community participation and collaboration with NGOs** – A zero tolerance to dropout program by galvanizing the participation of NGOs, Self Help Groups (SHGs), Village Council (Village Dorbar), School Management Committee (SMCs) etc. and ranking them will lead to healthy completion among them to ensure least dropout in their villages. Encourage schools to incorporate dropout issues in their school based plan so that collective efforts come from the school, parents and community. Programmes should be developed for better engagement with the local communities. There is evidence from best practices that wherever the communities are involved and consider education as a collective responsibility, the state of education improves significantly.
- 3. Improve Teacher deployment and training to ensure quality of teaching**
 - a. Rationalization of schools, teacher redeployment based on student enrolment, improving quality and coverage of teacher training, systematic and well monitored remedial teaching, tutoring/mentoring and with tracking student attendance and learning levels will go a long way in reducing dropout. This is one way to build the confidence of the parents in the government schools, especially at elementary level.
 - b. Schools should ensure that the academic calendar has holidays during the peak agricultural season (sowing/harvesting) because parents tend to pull their children out of school as they are required to help out with the cultivation/harvesting in the field or because they have to manage domestic chores.
- 4. Ensure convergence between departments and effective review/monitoring** – Close monitoring and review of dropout periodically by the District Collector, District School Education Officer (DSEO), Sub Divisional Education Officer (SDEO) and by Samagra Shiksha monitoring staff at respective levels is critical. At local school level, Head Teacher, SMCs and the Cluster Resource Persons (CRPs) should become alert if the student is absent for more than 3 consecutive days. SMCs should be notified and community level meetings held to encourage the families to send the child back to school. There is a need for a more personal touch by the teachers or even community members to follow up with a child who is vulnerable to dropping out of school. These reviews should involve appropriate convergence between the Social Welfare department, Police, Rural Development, etc. to prevent early childhood marriages, to make parents aware of the need to bring the child back to school, etc.

- 5. Improve speed and efficiency in delivery of entitlements and improvement on Infrastructure** - Timely dispersal of books, school uniforms, mid-day meal, school infrastructure (classrooms, toilets) etc. will go a long way in creating excitement about going to school and will encourage the parents to ensure that their wards enroll and attend schools. In order to develop schools into institutions which provide appropriate education to students, schools must at least have adequate infrastructure and a required number of teachers. The State Government may seek the support of non-state players to extend their support for infrastructure improvement.
- 6. Implement effective tracking systems** - Tracking of student attendance/participation in schools is critical, especially providing academic support for students by identifying early warning signs or students at risk of dropping out. Behavioral interventions to help minimize mental, emotional, physical and other symptoms of dropping out will also help prevent drop out. Build a common understanding about drop outs across all schools and collect relevant data for better monitoring. This includes arriving at a common definition as well as a standardized procedure for identifying, tracking, and follow-up of dropouts across the State. This could be done effectively through the use of ICT.
- 7. Strengthen quality of school education data and tracking systems** to track enrolment and student assessments' performance. The Ministry of Education (MoE), Government of India (GOI) shared the formats for Student Database Management Information System (SDMIS) as part of UDISE +. Meghalaya should develop this data as a single source of truth for all school education stakeholders – DSEL, Mission Director, DEOs, POs, Head Teachers, Mid Day Meal management, for supply of uniforms and textbooks, deployment of teachers, sanction of teacher and head teacher posts, etc. To ensure reliability and quality of UDISE+ in the State:
 - a. DSEL & Mission Director, Samagra Shiksha, should review the current UDISE data and develop an action plan to improve its quality, identify gaps/inconsistencies and ensure field verification to improve quality for better targeting and tracking dropout at Block, cluster, habitations and school levels.
 - b. A senior officer from the school education department should be identified and deployed as State Data Manager. Experienced and qualified data consultants and capable officials to work as a Single Point of Contact (SPOC) at district level should be positioned in the DEO office to coordinate all activities relating to data collection, validation and management. Awareness and capacity building workshops should be conducted for proper orientation, action plan development and implementation to various stakeholders – DEOs, DPOs, Block Education officers (BEOs), School Headmasters, teachers, CRPs, data collectors, data entry operators, SMC members, etc.
 - c. At the State level, cross validation of UDISE data should be taken up with Public Distribution System (PDS), Aadhaar, and with any other major data systems available in Meghalaya. The Annual Household Survey should be conducted in a systematic manner and the data cross validated with U DISE data of previous year, especially to identify dropout students who have not transitioned into the next grade and follow-up.
 - d. The duplicate/fake/mismatching/inconsistent data relating to enrolment by category, the medium of instructions, age, gender, school, etc. - should be identified and systematically verified at the field level. Once cleaned and improved, the data should be made available/ accessible to users at all levels - cluster, block, district, and state.

B. Field or program-level interventions

In addition to the above, systematic interventions should be designed and implemented to address dropout at each level of school education as discussed below:

1. Reducing & preventing Lower Primary level dropout

- a. To improve the lower primary level dropout rate all districts except East & West Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, and Ri-Bhoi are to be targeted.
- b. The quality of preschool education at Anganwadi Centers (AW play-based learning methods for three to five years children will enrich and enhance their brain development and make them school-ready. Ensuring the widespread availability of pre-primary education programs is essential to lay a strong foundation for every child's future academic and personal development.
- c. Optimum deployment of trained teachers in primary schools, and equipping them with skills and competencies to ensure strong foundational literacy and numeracy among children, providing structured lesson plans and TLM will engage the students and will help prevent dropout.
- d. Strengthening English language learning alongside local language or Modern Indian language (MIL) will ease the transition to Grade 5 in primary schools.

2. Reducing & preventing Upper Primary Level dropout

- a. For improving the upper primary level dropout rate all districts, except West Garo, East Khasi, and South West Garo Hills, are to be targeted.
- b. Regular holding of Parent Teacher Association meetings in rural areas across all levels- Primary to Secondary should be monitored.
- c. Effective remedial teaching, free tuition by community members, to needy students, and tracking their assessments will ensure their regular attendance. It will prevent weak students from dropping out and will also ensure return to schools sooner by those students who dropped out.
- d. Improving infrastructural facilities in the school, especially providing separate and functional toilets is proven to be a good intervention to retain students in schools.
- e. Improving the quality of teacher training, equipping them to exhibit emotional intelligence, and integrating digital content into teaching (where possible) will help students to be engaged.
- f. Key stage assessment for classes 3, 5 & 8 should be conducted, remedial teaching facilitated, and student performance tracking to reduce/ prevent dropout due to poor learning levels.

3. Reducing & preventing Secondary Level dropout

- a. To improve the secondary-level dropout rate, all districts except East Khasi Hills are to be targeted.
- b. Improving infrastructural facilities in the secondary schools (classrooms, toilets, residential/hostel facilities), transport allowance or school bus facility, improved health and wellness services, co-curricular activities, facilitating active student clubs, and career counseling to students, will keep students more regular and engaged in attending school.

- c. Effective remedial teaching-learning opportunities, setting up STEM labs, expanding Vocational Education with mandatory internships, will help the students acquire valuable skills, increase their motivation to stay in school and complete their schooling and transition to higher secondary.
- d. Special efforts should be made to promote girls' education and address gender disparity, by providing scholarships, safe transportation, gender-sensitive curriculum, collaboration with NGOs, SHGs and local authorities to identify and remove barriers to girls' education (sibling care, early marriages, etc).
- e. A thorough review of the functioning of the STCs and NIOS Study Centers should be undertaken, gaps identified and addressed. Proper monitoring and tracking systems should be put in place to ensure that the students do not drop out, but improve their learning and be mainstream to regular secondary schools.
- f. Capacity building of CRPs/BRCs to identify potential dropout, monitor and facilitate return to schools is critical at Secondary Schools, particularly in districts with high drop-out rates, ensuring proactive attendance updates and prompt follow-ups. Leveraging technology, maintaining a database of low attendance students, students identified as potential or real dropouts and tracking them closely and continuously will improve retention in schools.

Apart from all of the above recommendations, notable thrust on the Government of Meghalaya's efforts on the Back to School campaign initiative is imperative as this is pivotal to mainstream the drop-out students while elevating literacy rate. In this regard, the state education department can closely coordinate with all district administrations to take proactive measures to bring back all the OoSC to school as the problem demands urgent attention by the authorities. As part of the Back to school initiatives, after identification of all dropout students is carried out at Block & District level, the following step should be to involve parents to enroll their childrens to schools, monitor the enrolled students and galvanizing public participation through Village Councils presided by District and Block Administration. Sustainability is crucial in such initiatives, and for this, community support is critical. Additionally, the School Management Committees can play a major role and start bottom-up initiatives in the form of various campaigns, collection of donations to support the poorest of the poor students with school bags, stationeries, and other aids. Recognizing the significant role of SMCs at the village level to drive good governance, performance and school development, awards and felicitation of outstanding SMCs should be encouraged to elevate their motivation.

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Annexure

Sl.No.	Reasons For Drop-Out Views from students, teachers and dropout	Rate all factors which you encountered that are responsible for dropout
1.	Individual Factors	
	a. Health problem	
	b. Started school late as there is no nearby school	
	c. Lack of interest of the child	
	d. Lack of motivation	
	e. Lack of awareness among the parents	
	f. Teacher partiality	
	g. Dislike of School Experience	
	h. Lack of interest among the parents to send their children to schools	
	i. Friends Influence	
	J. any other, list them	
2.	Socio economic factor	
	a. Have to leave school for employment	
	b. Economic Reasons	
	c. Leave schools to Look after siblings	
	d. Lack of Transportation	
	e.logistic	
	f. Child marriage	
	g. Teenage pregnancy	
	h. Needed to support at Home	
	i. Aid available from schools- textbooks, books, etc.	
	J. any other, specify	
3.	Academic factor	
	a. Academic Difficulty (lack of understanding what is	

	being taught in the class)	
	b. Behavioral Difficulty	
	c. Failure multiple times	
	d. Lack of Appropriate Curriculum	
	e. Language Difficulty	
	f. Poor Relationships with Fellow Students	
	g. Poor Student-Staff Relationships	
	h. Absence of Laboratory/Libraries	
	i. Availability of permanent teachers	
	j. Absence of Lower Primary Schools in the village and nearby areas	
	k. Absence of upper primary schools in the village and nearby areas	
	l. Absence of secondary schools in the village or nearby areas	
	J. any other, list them	
4.	Parents Response and views and action taken on children dropout	
5.	Teachers response, views, action taken on Dropout	
6.	School Management Committee views, and action taken on dropout	
7.	For any other please specify:	

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