EVERY CHILD DESERVES QUALITY EDUCATION
CENTRAL SQUARE FOUNDATION

is a nonprofit organization working with the vision of ensuring quality school education for all children in India. We are driven by our mission to transform the school education system towards improving the learning outcomes of children, especially from low-income communities. By building an effective and inclusive education system, we can ensure that all children get equal access to opportunities needed for leading a better life.

In order to achieve our goal, we make grants and partner with social impact organizations to bring innovative solutions in education, as well as work with the government to drive scalable, sustainable and positive impact. We also collaborate with the private sector, nonprofit organizations and other ecosystem stakeholders to build research and create effective proven tools around critical issues such as foundational learning, early childhood education, classroom instruction methods, technology in education and system governance.
Our Journey So Far...

2012
- Founded by Ashish Dhawan
- Started Mindspark Centres in Delhi in partnership with Educational Initiatives
- Funded 3.2.1 Education Foundation

2013
- Incubated India School Leadership Institute (ISLI)

2014
- Launched two reports on large-scale student assessments and public-private partnerships in school education, in association with FICCI

2015
- Released the first edition of the *State of the Nation: RTE Section 12 (1)(c)* report, co-authored with IIM-A, Accountability Initiative and Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy
- Launched KA India, Khan Academy’s only office outside the US
- Incubated The Teacher App

2016
- Supported FSG’s Program to Improve Private Preschool Education (PIPE)
- Hosted EduSquare, a two-day convening of our partners for knowledge sharing
- Provided strategic and financial support to Language and Learning Foundation (LLF)

2017
- Partnered with EkStep Foundation to assist MHRD and NCTE in developing the national digital platform, DIKSHA
- Partnered with Chhattisgarh Infotech Promotion Society (CHiPS) and the state’s Department of Education for a large-scale EdTech intervention in government schools
- Initiated a career guidance program in schools run by the Directorate of Education in Delhi, along with iDreamCareer and UNDP India

2018
- Raised external funding from strategic partners such as Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Steadview Capital and Google India to help improve student learning outcomes in India
OUR FOCUS AREAS

FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

Foundational learning refers to children’s ability to read with meaning and do basic math calculations by class 3. These gateway skills equip children to learn better in later grades and hence are the most critical in building an effective and inclusive education system. High-quality foundational learning for all children in primary classes is our top priority, and a majority of our work is centred on this important goal.

TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION

We believe technology has the potential to deliver personalized learning tools to a large number of children. It can also support teachers with pedagogically-sound solutions to enhance how education is delivered to students. Our focus is on building evidence on the efficacy of EdTech and strengthening the supply of such technologies so that they can be used at scale.

PRIVATE SCHOOL SECTOR

With an increasing number of children now studying in affordable private schools, we believe it is important to raise the quality of education provided in these schools. For this, we are looking to address the constraints that prevent private schools from raising learning outcomes, as well as support innovative research initiatives that can help improve quality.

GOVERNANCE

For education reform efforts to be successful in the long term, it is necessary for them to be driven and owned by the state. We believe in building state capacity for sustainable impact by working with the system to identify constraints and develop contextual solutions. We also provide strategic advice, technical expertise as well as management and implementation support to state governments.
In India, we have achieved near universal access to primary schooling. Close to 97% children in the 6- to 14-year age group are enrolled in more than 1.4 million schools across the country. However, there is an urgent need to turn the focus on the quality of learning. Several data sources have consistently shown that more than half of the students are leaving school without even acquiring basic reading and arithmetic skills. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2018 found that only 27.2% of children in class 3 could read a class 2-level text, while only 28.1% could do simple subtraction. The 2017 National Achievement Survey (NAS) also indicated that there is a large number of students who struggle to read simple text or do basic math.

We believe that the key to improving learning outcomes is ensuring that all children attain foundational learning in the crucial early years.
WHY FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

GATEWAY SKILLS

Those who fail to attain basic literacy and numeracy skills by class 3 find it difficult to catch up with the rigour of the curriculum in later classes and fall behind, creating wide learning gaps. This also increases the chances of these students dropping out of the school system altogether.

PROMOTES EQUITABLE & INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

For children from disadvantaged and low-income communities, the home environment is unable to supplement school education. Providing these children with foundational skills in the early years ensures that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, are given equal opportunity to perform well in schools and are better prepared to improve their quality of life.

CRITICAL TO IMPROVE OVERALL SYSTEM PERFORMANCE

Countries have moved from low to middle levels of performance by reducing the proportion of lowest performing children and ensuring that there are very few students who have not mastered these foundational skills. The examples of Vietnam, Brazil, Kenya and Peru show that making foundational learning a priority benefits not just the individual child, but also improves the learning levels of the country as a whole. Investing in early grades is also cost-effective – the highest rate of economic return comes from the earliest investments in children.

LONG-TERM BENEFITS

By empowering individuals to take advantage of the extensive benefits of education in later years, foundational learning ensures better life outcomes. It is directly correlated to increased workforce participation and opens up opportunities for social and economic advancement. Research has also linked foundational learning to increased employability and higher GDP. The EFA Global Monitoring Report 2013-14 calculated that if all students left school with basic reading skills, 171 million people could be lifted out of poverty.
1. SETTING EXPECTATIONS
To engage with decision-makers and stakeholders to position foundational learning in classes 1 to 3 as the foremost priority for the education system. This includes defining clear and measurable goals to achieve foundational learning (through comprehensive in-classroom products).

2. PROVIDING SUPPORT
To co-create a foundational learning program contextualized to a state based on comprehensive evidence and best practices from within India and internationally. We are working with partners to design a robust package with in-classroom elements (such as instructional design and teaching learning material for students) as well as key system enablers (such as teacher training and mentoring). This package will also look at state-specific, structural factors such as the differences in language at home and in school, and the multiple levels of competency within classrooms.

3. INSTITUTIONALIZING MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY
To establish constant and rigorous evaluation for course-correction and state-owned accountability for the package. We aim to leverage and strengthen systemic capacity to create transparent accountability mechanisms.

4. BUILDING FOR SCALE AND SUSTAINABILITY
To ensure strong ownership by the government to achieve long-term sustainable impact at scale. This involves working with the system and building state capacity and ownership for adoption of the intended pedagogical and structural changes, and ensuring that the solutions are cost-effective and can be scaled effectively.

We believe that a collaborative approach to deliver a comprehensive and scalable pedagogical solution, backed by key system reforms, is imperative to meet the common goal of foundational learning. Our main objective is to build on the existing evidence and demonstrate how large-scale education reform could be conducted.

Inspired by the Doing Development Differently (DDD) framework by Luis Crouch and Joseph DeStefano (2017), we are working with key partner states to co-design and deliver a program that can show significant increase in foundational learning at scale. The key elements of the program are outlined below.
There is strong evidence linking early childhood education (ECE) with foundational literacy and numeracy; yet in India, both the provision as well as quality of pre-primary education is below par. We believe there should be greater policy focus on ECE, including tighter integration of ECE with the primary school system, and increased funding of tools, programs and research around quality pre-primary education.

Our objective is to test and demonstrate multiple models of providing quality ECE, to ensure school readiness for students transitioning to class 1 in the next year. To achieve this at scale, we are pushing for a pre-primary section (PPS) or one year of preschool in all government primary schools. We are engaging with states as well as reputed nonprofits across the country to develop and initiate a demonstration of the efficacy of the PPS model.

We are also testing an accelerated school readiness program (SRP), to be implemented in the first few weeks of class 1. Given the large percentage of 5-year-olds in class 1 in government schools across the country, this low-cost model could have considerable benefits.

One of the major roadblocks to improving foundational learning in India is the lack of scale-ready, proven classroom solutions which are holistic in nature, keeping pedagogy at the centre. Our aim is to establish the elements of an effective, holistic solution – such as classroom instructional design, tools used by teachers and students, instructional time for literacy and numeracy, teacher training, monitoring and coaching, as well as aspects of community engagement. We will also work closely with partners to identify innovations in these areas, and knit them together to demonstrate impact on foundational learning, at reasonable scale.

At the same time, we are also working to increase the availability of public goods centred around foundational learning, including increasing evidence around effective models and developing a resource bank of high-quality materials aligned to the classroom solution.

We believe technology can also form a part of this solution – there is directional evidence around technology driving foundational learning in low-income settings. However, there is a dearth of contextualized, proven and scale-ready EdTech solutions that can improve foundational literacy and numeracy. To bridge this gap, we are working on understanding the needs of students, teachers and parents (who form the demand side); identifying promising EdTech solutions and running pilots of these solutions to demonstrate efficacy; and then scaling these solutions across low-income communities.
Technology can play a powerful role in providing innovative solutions to many of the problems facing the education system in India. At CSF, our goal is to leverage the huge possibilities and wide reach of technology to improve foundational learning in primary classes and middle schools.

**KEY EDTECH MODELS**

**Personalized and Adaptive Learning:** Adaptive and personalized learning tools can enable students to learn at their own pace, as per their learning level, and in their own style. This offers tremendous potential in the Indian context, where the learning levels of students differ significantly within each class.

**Digital Classrooms:** This approach equips teachers to supplement classroom teaching by typically using projectors, speakers, interactive whiteboards and television screens to display educational videos, animations and other interactive content. It also helps make instruction delivery consistent, thus democratizing access to expert teaching.
To achieve our goal, we are looking to enhance the supply of EdTech solutions and facilitate the adoption of these solutions at scale. We are running an initiative called **EdTech Lab** to identify promising technology-based solutions in both the for-profit and nonprofit sector, and create evidence around their efficacy through evaluations and expert reviews. The shortlisted solutions will be tested in government schools and will be provided with support for product contextualization to cater to students in government schools, thereby making them ready for scale. We will also continue to fund and build the capacity of early-stage EdTech nonprofits working on improving learning outcomes of children from low-income communities.

A significant roadblock to improving the supply of EdTech solutions is the paucity of high-quality open-source educational resources, especially in vernacular languages. To close this gap, CSF has partnered with Google.org and YouTube Learning to run the **Content Accelerator Project** – to create curriculum-aligned, video content for mathematics in Hindi and Telugu for classes 1 to 10. The project aims to strengthen the educational content creation ecosystem in the country by building the capacity of content creators, and documenting and sharing best practices on how to create engaging video content aligned with national curriculum and standards.

On the demand side, large-scale adoption of EdTech faces major challenges such as poor procurement norms and lack of knowledge on implementation among decision-makers. We are working with the government to refine the ICT (Information and Communications Technology) policy. We are also providing technical support to a few states to promote scalable and sustainable adoption in schools. In addition, in order to enable access to quality learning outside of the school, we are studying best practices for distribution and usage of technology in direct-to-home settings.
Private schools form an important part of the Indian education landscape – approximately a third of all children study in private unaided schools, and several states already have more than half of their children enrolled in private schools. The majority of these are ‘budget private schools’, charging anywhere between ₹150-1,500 per child, per month. However, student achievement in these schools is significantly below par and few children achieve grade-level competency.

We are working to improve the quality of education in private schools by testing evidence-backed solutions for the market failures that are hampering these schools from achieving better learning outcomes. These may include unreliable information on school quality, adoption of inappropriate education technology and lack of access to credit, among others.

Private schools are a severely under-researched sector, so we are also engaging with reputed academics and experts to undertake research projects that will help us better understand how private schools can be improved. Simultaneously, we are working to create increased knowledge around best practices in regulation of private schools.
Numerous education reform efforts are being made in India in both the public and private space. Yet the learning crisis persists. In some cases, interventions that address specific constraints such as class size, textbooks, teacher pay, pedagogy, etc. have worked in specific contexts, but not in others. And while some interventions have succeeded in experimental settings, few have scaled within the government and even fewer have shown sustained impact over time. At the heart of these failures are broken governance mechanisms that do not deliver as required.

Our objective is to support governments to tackle long-term structural challenges related to goal setting, incentives and delivery capacity. We aim to do this by partnering with states to identify local constraints to learning and to build contextual solutions for improving learning. We are also working to create and disseminate knowledge on governance-specific constraints and system enablers at the central and state level. At the same time, we hope to strengthen the ecosystem by creating common platforms for collaboration and cross-pollination of ideas.
At CSF, we recognize that a majority of the youth in India lacks the basic skills and mindsets relevant for future employment. We are, therefore, looking at ways to enable effective transition from school to work for students from the low-income segment in the 14-18-year age group. Our work is primarily focused on increasing lifetime earnings of the youth and improving labour force participation of women in India. In order to capitalize on the increasing Internet and mobile phone penetration across Indian households, we are keen to take a tech-enabled approach focusing on the end users for a majority of our work, to be able to achieve scale.

Based on evidence from research and labour market trends in India, we have prioritized Spoken English and career counselling as the two areas of focus to support our efforts to increase lifetime earnings of the youth. Going forward, we hope to identify opportunities that will help us build evidence in these areas around effective at-scale interventions for our target segment.
Research forms the backbone of all our efforts, ensuring that our work is rooted in strong evidence and can generate learnings for the overall education ecosystem. Our goal is to identify key gaps in existing literature on foundational learning and contribute towards building a rigorous evidence base. We are also instituting stringent monitoring and evaluation processes around the work we do, to build evidence on both the execution as well as the impact of reform initiatives designed to improve student learning outcomes. Through a diverse set of indicators and studies, we will be able to determine the areas where further work and efforts are required, and then collaborate with different partners to incorporate innovations and generate credible data to fill these key gaps in the current landscape.

We are also working towards building rigorous and technically robust tools to measure the levels of foundational literacy and numeracy skills among Indian students. These tools would help determine the current levels of learning, as well as measure shifts in the levels of attainment of foundational learning skills over time.
At Central Square Foundation, we believe that education reform in the Indian school system will be led by an ecosystem of high-performing nonprofits. However, there is a lack of sustained financial and strategic support for nonprofits in India, especially in their early stages.

To bridge this gap, the CSF Grant Accelerator aims to source and support early-stage nonprofits that are focused on improving the quality of K-12 education for low-income communities. We identify critical gaps and levers in the education ecosystem, and find existing organizations as well as incubate new organizations working on distinctive solutions to address these gaps. We invest deeply in our grantee organizations across their start-to-scale life cycle – this includes providing unrestricted capital as well as targeted strategic and operational support through internal advisory, resources and external partnerships, to ensure enhanced sustainability, scalability and impact.

Till date, we have deployed over USD 4.5 million in grant-capital, resulting in a robust portfolio of 30+ leading education nonprofits, including Khan Academy, 3.2.1 Education Foundation, India School Leadership institute (ISLI), Language and Learning Foundation (LLF) and The Teacher App.