Syllabus subtopic:

- Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources, issues relating to poverty and hunger.
- Development processes and the development industry the role of NGOs, SHGs, various groups and associations, donors, charities, institutional and other stakeholders

Prelims and Mains focus: about the report; its findings and significance

News: The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2019, was released by NGO Pratham on Tuesday.

How was the survey conducted?

- ASER surveyors visited almost 37,000 children between 4 and 8 years in 26 rural districts across 24 States.

- They asked each child to do a variety of tasks, testing cognitive skills as well as simple literacy and numeracy tests.

Key findings of the report

- Only 16% of children in Class 1 in 26 surveyed rural districts can read text at the prescribed level, while almost 40% cannot even recognize letters. Only 41% of these children could recognise two digit numbers.

- However, ASER found that the solution is not to spend longer hours teaching children the 3Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic).

- Counterintuitively, the report argues that a focus on cognitive skills rather than subject learning in the early years can make a big difference to basic literacy and numeracy abilities.
The survey shows that among Class 1 children who could correctly do none or only one of the tasks requiring cognitive skills, about 14% could read words, while 19% could do single digit addition.

However, among children who could correctly do all three cognitive tasks, 52% could read words, and 63% could solve the math problem.

The report says that “permitting underage children into primary grades puts them at a learning disadvantage which is difficult to overcome.”

The ASER surveyors found that a primary classroom could include students from a range of age groups, skewing towards younger children in government schools. More than a quarter of Class 1 students in government schools are only 4 or 5 years old, younger than the recommended age. The ASER data shows that these children struggle more than others in all skills.

Global research shows that 90% of brain growth occurs by age 5, meaning that the quality of early childhood education has a crucial impact on the development and schooling of a child.

The ASER report shows that a large number of factors determine the quality of education received at this stage, including the child’s home background, especially the mother’s education level; the type of school, and the child’s age in Class 1.

Based on a series of tests administered to the children, the report says, “ASER data shows that children's performance on tasks requiring cognitive skills is strongly related to their ability to do early language and numeracy tasks.”

Why an 'Early Years' ASER?

The early years, defined globally as age 0-8, is known to be the most important stage of cognitive, motor, social and emotional development in the human life cycle. A large body of worldwide research demonstrates that exposure to enabling environments and access to appropriate inputs
during these years is fundamental to ensuring that children have a firm foundation on which to build, both in school and in life.

- In India, as in many low and middle income countries, there is little evidence on scale with respect to whether young children have access to pre-primary facilities and whether they are acquiring the foundational skills and abilities that are key to subsequent success in school and beyond. Further, parents, families, community members and others are not always clear about the different kinds of abilities that can help young children cope with the demands both of academic learning and of everyday life. Child development experts know that breadth of skills and experiences is critically important in the early years and that exposing young children to formal academic content too early is often counterproductive; but many other adults responsible for children’s welfare – parents and policy makers alike – do not. Given the rising aspirations for educational success, parents often put their children into school well before they are developmentally “ready”.

- Most of the available instruments for assessing young children’s abilities are designed to be administered in institutional settings, by trained professionals, in order to inform experts. However, in order to ensure that the needs and abilities of young children move into the centre of current debates on educational policy and practice in India, the evidence needs to speak to and be understood by a much wider set of actors – parents as well as policy makers, practitioners as well as people at large.