



A Critical Study on the CBSE's Two-Exam System for Class 10

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Abstract

CBSE introduced the two-examination system in Class 10 from 2025-26 session in line with the recommendations of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 on offering the board examination system twice a year. The reform consists of a required exam in February/March (Phase 1) and an optional exam for improvement in May (Phase 2), where best of 2 is used for a maximum of 3 subjects. This research critically analyzes the reform from the educational, psychological, administrative, academic and policy perspectives. It aims to measure: academic outcomes, examination stress, learning outcomes and to explain, perceptions and challenges of stakeholders. The mixed method of descriptive and analytical was used, based on secondary data analysis from CBSE notifications, Ministry of Education documents, government reports, and peer-reviewed studies, analysed by content analysis, comparative analysis and percentage analysis. Results show that there are some general acceptances and a slight increase in pass. However, ongoing concerns about fees, scheduling, delayed documents and coaching dependency. The study findings suggest that the reform partially fulfills its goals of making students the main protagonists of learning and that there is a need to refine the administration of the reform in order to achieve its sustainability.

Keywords: CBSE Class 10; two-exam system; NEP 2020; examination stress; best-of-two scoring

1. Introduction

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) is one of the largest school boards in India, conducting the Class 10 exam and affiliating more than 30,000 schools that historically decide the stream that a student takes for senior secondary schooling (Deb, Strodl, & Sun, 2015). This assessment has been a one-time, terminal, annual examination for decades, focusing the value of a student's learning on a few days of testing. The National Education Policy 2020 intended to break this high-stakes culture by introducing examinations twice in a school year (once for the main examination and once for improvement) and shifting towards competency-based instead of

rote-learning based assessment (Ministry of Education, 2020). This vision was further translated into practice in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for School Education, 2023, with the suggestion of holding bi-annual board examinations and retaining the best score (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2023).

In response to these recommendations, CBSE sent out a draft policy in February 2025, and it published a formal notification for the two-examination system for Class 10 in the 2025–26 session (CBSE, 2025a, 2025b). Under the new structure, the first examination (Phase 1) in February-March is compulsory for all candidates, and the second examination (Phase 2) in May is optional and for improvement (Kaushik, 2025). In Phase 2, a student may take up to three subjects (Science, Mathematics, Social Science, and languages) and the highest of the two scores in each subject will be retained (CBSE, 2025b). A theory paper (80 marks) and internal assessment (20 marks) have been maintained for each subject. The major rationale behind the reform is psychological, lowering the pressure to take examinations that is well reported in Indian adolescents and associated with poor mental health (Deb et al., 2015). CBSE introduces the concept of a two-stage process in place of one event in order to reduce risk, avoid one-year loss, and make the assessment process more similar to that used in other parts of the world (IMPRI, 2025). But the impact of any such reform is contingent upon how teachers, students and parents experience it, and the importance of investigating the stakeholder perspectives.

2. Literature Review

The board years are always reported as times of severe psychological stress in India. Deb, Strodl, and Sun (2015) observed that there was high prevalence of academic stress and parental stress in high school children of Kolkata and that psychiatric morbidity was highly correlated with examination stress. Their previous research also correlated higher stress levels with the requirements of the academic curriculum in private schools (Deb, Strodl, & Sun, 2014). Stress in the competitive examination system was a systemic, not individual stress as Verma, Sharma and Larson (2002) had demonstrated earlier in India. Such a trend has been reiterated in recent studies: Pienyu, Margaret and D'Souza (2024) found that exam anxiety was high for competitive exams in Karnataka, and Deb and Deb (2025) highlighted the disproportionate impact of the Grade X exam on students' lives and called for school-based counselling support. An alternative literature explores the design of assessment as a stress lever. Rahiman et al. (2023) found that the uncertainty in administration of the exams increases anxiety, suggesting that having a second chance at predictable exams can decrease this anxiety. Supportive structures that help spread the pressure over many attempts to the academic task are likely to buffer the effects of academic stress on anxiety; this is theoretically substantiated by comparative work by Yang and Yang (2022). Taken together, these results indicate a possible reduction in the "single-shot pressure" faced by the player in earlier studies, in a best of two model.

On policy, the understanding of NEP 2020 is less divided. The policy changes with respect to the assessment reforms are progressive as per the Ministry of Education (2020) and IMPRI (2025).

Aithal and Aithal (2020) noted that the policy's intent was noble, but that it would be challenging to have a negative impact if the implementation strategies were weak. In a study of students, teachers and experts, Kulal et al. (2024) reported the presence of both optimism and scepticism about NEP reforms and the readiness of institutions. Importantly, the studies disagree: psychological research is heavily in favor of reducing examination stakes and policy research suggests that it's important to implement exams and not that they are successful. Furthermore, all the literature currently available is pre-2026 roll-out and deals with stress or NEP in general. There is no peer-reviewed research that has been conducted to date based upon post-implementation data for the operational two-examination system of CBSE. This is an identified gap in the research and is the first study to combine the newest official examination results with reported evidence from stakeholders.

3. Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of CBSE's two-exam system on students' academic performance, examination stress, and learning outcomes.
2. To critically analyse the perceptions and challenges associated with the two-exam system among students, parents, teachers, and educational stakeholders.

4. Research Hypotheses

H1: The two-examination system reduces examination-related stress and marginally improves aggregate academic performance relative to the single-examination system.

H2: Stakeholder groups differ in perception, with administrative and financial concerns outweighing psychological benefits for institutional stakeholders (teachers and schools).

5. Methodology

The present study uses descriptive and analytical type of research to examine descriptively and analytically the CBSE two-examination system at class-10. A descriptive design would be appropriate, as the reform is relatively new, and the study is intended to accurately capture how the reform is structured, why, and how it is received by stakeholders. An analytical layer is added to interpret the results of the study and to consider other perspectives. A mixed-method approach is used, which involves quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative part relies on official examination statistics (number of participants, pass rates, and numbers of attempts), while the qualitative part focuses on the meaning of policy intent, stakeholder opinion and the implications for administration. The study is methodologically appropriate, as the system was only completed in the full cycle in 2026, which means that the study is based on secondary sources rather than new primary surveys.

The sampling frame is conceptual and stakeholder based, involving the three main stakeholders involved in the reform Class 10 learners, parents and teachers/school administrators. They are not based on first hand research, but reconstructed from documented consultations and reports. The sources of data are date sheets and notifications issued by CBSE, Ministry of Education and curriculum-framework documents, government press releases and articles published in peer-

reviewed journals, which are indexed in scholarly databases. Only authentic, traceable data are used. The analytical tools used are content analysis for interpretation of policy documents and stakeholder statements, comparative analysis for comparing old and new systems and descriptive analysis and percentage analysis to summarize the examination results. The techniques are appropriate for a study on policy evaluation that involves balancing textual and numerical evidence and results in a critical evaluation of the policy.

The study is based on secondary data and published reports. The findings are descriptive and analytical in nature and should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive evidence.

6. Results and Findings

Table 1. Comparison between the previous single-exam system and the new two-exam system

Dimension	Single-exam system (until 2025)	Two-exam system (from 2026)
Attempts per year	One	Two (Phase 1 + Phase 2)
Schedule	February–March only	Phase 1: Feb–Mar; Phase 2: May
Improvement	Next cycle / compartment only	Same-year second attempt, up to 3 subjects
Scoring	Single score	Best-of-two per subject
Result declaration	~May	Phase 1: April; Phase 2: June

Source: CBSE (2025b); CBSE (2026).

The structural change is not a superficial one, as shown by the data in Table 1. The change in the traditional single terminal score is to a best-of-two outcome, involving an in-year second attempt for up to three subjects (CBSE, 2025b). The system makes one event into two stages and delays the real outcome until June, instead of a "one-chance" system. The following redesign directly addresses the first objective by changing the environment that will create the production of performance and stress (CBSE, 2026).

Table 2. Key features of the CBSE two-exam policy

Feature	Detail
Phase 1 (mandatory)	February 17 – March 2026
Phase 2 (optional)	May 15 – 21, 2026
Improvement subjects	Science, Mathematics, Social Science, languages (max 3)
Scoring rule	Best-of-two (higher score retained)
Paper structure	80 theories + 20 internal; ~50% competency/MCQ-based
Results	Phase 1: April; Phase 2: June

Source: CBSE (2025b); CBSE (2026); Kaushik (2025).

Table 2 has a very narrowly defined design that would minimize downside losses. Since only the higher score is considered, participation in Phase 2 is strategically safe, meaning it can only raise a score, and not lower it (CBSE, 2025b). Maintenance of 80+20 structure and shift towards competency-based questions ensures assessment rigor and minimizes rote dependence (Kaushik,

2025). These elements bring into effect the flexibility principle of NEP 2020 and are vital to the assessment of the reform with respect to the stated learning-outcome goals.

Table 3. Potential benefits reported by stakeholders

Benefit	Basis
Lower single-exam pressure	Two-stage design
Same-year second chance	No loss of academic year
Removal of compartment stigma	Recoverable failure
Best score retained	No downside risk
Student support level	64.4% in favour

Source: Parthiban (2025); Chettri (2025); CBSE (2025b).

As shown in Table 3, perceived benefits tend to fall into the categories of stress reduction and fairness. Interestingly, the majority of consulted students (64.4%) were in favour of the system, but it was not unanimous (Parthiban, 2025). The reframing of failure as recoverable through removal of the compartment stigma as an especially valued outcome (Chettri, 2025). The results indicate that these changes are mainly perceived as a psychological and academic safety device, which is consistent with the first objective.

Table 4. Major challenges associated with the two-exam system

Challenge	Nature
Double examination fee	Financial
Shorter effective teaching time	Academic/operational
Class 11 admission complications	Administrative
Delayed final documents/certificates	Administrative
Vacation loss / coaching dependency	Psychological/social

Source: Chettri (2025); CBSE (2025b).

Table 4 shows that challenges are focused at institutional level and not at student level. The lack of compressed teaching time and scheduling issues were highlighted by principals, and the delay in distributing final documents for Phase 2 makes class 11 admissions challenging (Chettri, 2025; CBSE, 2025b). This adds one extra layer of cost to the transaction because the fees have to be collected for both phases. These tensions directly feed into the second objective, as part of the stress is shifted to administrators as a result of the reform.

Table 5. Impact of the reform on participation and academic performance

Indicator	2025 (single)	2026 (two-exam)
Students appeared (Phase 1)	23,71,939	~24–25 lakh
Overall pass %	93.66%	93.70%
Girls / Boys pass %	95% / ~93%	94.99% / 92.60%
Phase 2 applications	—	6.68 lakh (>5.25 lakh to improve)

Source: News Services Division, All India Radio (2025b); CBSE (2026).

Note: The comparison between 2025 and 2026 examination statistics is descriptive and intended to provide an overview of available data.

The marginal rise in pass-percentage from 93.66% to 93.70% is complemented by significant voluntary participation in Phase 2 (6.68 lakh applications, CBSE 2026, News Services Division 2025b). The best of two rule protects scores, so an aggregate outcome can only get better and/or more stable. This disparity between the genders is consistent with the overall pattern. The available data suggest preliminary positive trends; however, further empirical studies are required to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of the reform.

Table 6. Stakeholder perception comparison

Stakeholder	Dominant view	Main concern
Students	Supportive (64.4%)	Vacation loss, longer preparation
Parents	Supportive	Double fees
Teachers/schools	Mixed/cautious	Teaching time, scheduling, admissions

Source: Parthiban (2025); Chettri (2025).

Table 6 shows that there is a perception gradient with students and parents being more supportive, and more cautious are teachers and schools (Parthiban, 2025; Chettri, 2025). These findings indicate differences in stakeholder perceptions; however, further empirical investigation is required to establish the extent of such differences, the costs of administration and finances are given more weight than the psychological benefits. The contrast directly tackles the second goal and marks the priority areas for the implementation of support to make the reform work.

7. Discussion

The results can be used to give a direct answer to both objectives. As to the first (impact on performance, stress and learning outcomes), the evidence is inconclusive but promising. As the best-of-two rule has only a positive impact on a subject score, participation on a large scale (more than 6.68 lakh applications) is expected to benefit or safeguard the results without posing a risk of any sort (CBSE, 2026; News Services Division, 2025b). The reform, psychologically, targets the exact stressor Indian research has long identified, that is, the stress of having the entire consequences in one go (Deb et al., 2015; Verma et al., 2002). It ensures that if there is a second attempt, it is within the same year and therefore the risk of doing the same paper again is decreased, which aligns with the findings that there was a relationship between a predictable reassessment and the reduction of anxiety (Rahiman et al., 2023). Delinking of the stigma of the compartment reframing failure as recoverable (Chettri, 2025). In terms of the second perceptions and challenges, the picture is more divided. The students were generally positive and indicated that they appreciate the chance to enhance their skills, though they did express worries about the shortened vacation periods and the extended preparation time (Parthiban, 2025). Parents were pleased to have the opportunity of improving marks, but some complained that they would have to pay for both phases. The most structural concerns expressed by teachers and principals were the reduced effective teaching time, the issue of the timing of the examination, and the

difficulties in admission of Class 11, as the final documents are not released until after the Phase 2 results (Chettri, 2025; CBSE, 2025b). This split is consistent with H2, namely that the institutional stakeholders are more concerned about the administrative and financial aspects than the psychological aspects.

The findings are consistent with and confirm earlier published studies. These findings support the psychological case for lower stakes, put forward by stress researchers but also vindicate the scepticism about implementation, expressed by Aithal and Aithal (2020) and Kulal et al. (2024), that NEP reforms are not about their design, but about their operational readiness, as evidenced by the frictions over fees, scheduling and results experienced here. These benefits of the reform, such as lower examination anxiety, a real improvement window, no loss of academic year, and increased flexibility, are therefore real, but are offset by an extended academic cycle, delayed results, increased administration, added cost and potentially a greater reliance on coaching as families plan for two cycles. A balanced reading is that the system promotes NEP's student-centred objectives and that some of the stress is removed from the students and placed on the administrative machinery, with the result being one that is consistent with policy objectives but requires careful administration.

8. Conclusion

The CBSE Class 10 two-examination system marks the biggest shift in the school evaluation system for over a decade in India, and is a tangible implementation of the vision of lower-stakes evaluation in the NEP 2020. Overall, the reform appears to have some positive outcomes, in that it more clearly allows students to leave the school with fewer than three exams passed, it does not remove a year of schooling, it eliminates the “compartment” effect, and it has some (albeit marginal) positive impact on the overall results. The psychological and academic benefits are real and are in line with the existing research on examination stress in India. But such gains are offset by the actual administrative and monetary expenses, two-fold fees, shorter teaching and vacation periods, late finalizing of documents, scheduling difficulties, and the possibility of increased coaching dependency. The system is then more effective as a student-centered psychological reform than an administratively resolved one. CBSE should rationalize fee structure, devise a mechanism that does not require delayed documentation to enroll students in Class 11, streamline result timelines and provide clear guidance regarding the schedule to schools for effective implementation. This development can take the two-examination model from the promising intervention stage to the sustainable and equitable stage of secondary education in India.

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Cite this Article:

Nitu, "A Critical Study on the CBSE's Two-Exam System for Class 10" Shiksha Samvad International Open Access Peer-Reviewed & Refereed Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, ISSN: 2584-0983 (Online), Volume 03, Issue 04, Pp.138-146, June-2026. Journal URL: <https://shikshasamvad.com/>



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A Critical Study on the CBSE's Two-Exam System for Class 10

Published in 'Shiksha Samvad' Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Research Journal and E-ISSN: 2584-0983(Online), Volume-03, Issue-04, Month June 2026.

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