

The Learning Curve: Contributor's Guide

The Learning Curve: A quick overview

The Learning Curve is a series of data-driven essays on timely education policy topics intended to inform and empower policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels.

Learning Curve essays contain original data analysis on a topic of policy interest. Essays are published as PDFs, accompanied by a comprehensive, accessible summary for readers who want to understand the key points quickly. Whenever possible, data and code will be made available to readers who want to dig into the data themselves.

The Learning Curve publishes essays from Urban Institute researchers and external authors. Essays are published in Urban's templates and are promoted by Urban's Center on Education Data and Policy. Authors will have full access to Urban's team of research and communications professionals, and all content will go through a standard quality assurance process.

What makes the Learning Curve different?

Unlike traditional academic papers, Learning Curve essays are *timely, accessible, and narrowly focused*. Unlike blog posts, Learning Curve essays are *data driven* and spend some time (but not too much!) on methods and data concerns. And though we encourage authors to provide policy solutions based on their findings, the Learning Curve emphasizes *making data transparent and available* so policymakers and other stakeholders can explore and come to their own conclusions.

Who is the audience?

Education decisionmakers at the federal, state, and local levels who are looking to advance system-level change to improve outcomes for students, particularly students who are underserved by the education system.

What does an essay look like?

An essay should be roughly 2,000 words, with a handful of charts and tables. Urban's team will work with authors to determine the best combination of charts and tables, including producing interactive data visualizations where it can help elevate a point.

Given the relatively short word count, essays should have one main point and should focus on that point. Urban's team can help you hone that point and your writing.

Your essay will be published with a summary, written by Urban communications staff, and any code or data files you can make available.

What makes a strong essay topic?

The ideal essay topic is something of current interest to policymakers where there is a gap in the public conversation.

Analyses should be relatively simple and should generate a clear takeaway that you can communicate in a sentence or two. We especially encourage descriptive analyses. **Essays must involve some original data analysis.**

What kind of content is not a fit for this effort?

- summaries of existing research
- complex analyses (if it requires 1,000 words just to describe your methods, it is too complex)
- opinion-driven commentaries
- essays that endorse specific legislation

What will the process look like?

- To get started, contributors should submit an idea to learningcurve@urban.org. This doesn't need to be a detailed proposal, but please give us a sense of the analysis you expect to do and why you think it's important. Urban staff will be in touch with feedback.
- Once you've gotten the go-ahead from Urban, we'll agree on a timeline for you to write a draft. That draft will be reviewed by Urban's research and communications staff, and there's the potential for multiple rounds of feedback. This is an iterative process intended to make your essay as strong as possible.
- When everyone's happy with the draft, contributors will submit the text, charts, and code to Urban for quality assurance. Urban will copyedit the text, format the charts, put everything in an Urban template, and check the code.
- During the quality assurance process, Urban will draft a summary and other outreach collateral to promote the essay to target audiences. Contributors will be given a chance to review the summary and other content.
- Once essays and supporting content are published, authors are encouraged to promote their work and are welcome to cross-post on their own platforms if applicable. Authors are also welcome to build on their analysis in future work (including academic papers).

Who is funding this effort?

Our current funding is from the Walton Family Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Expectations, payment, and other details

Authors will receive honoraria of \$1,000 for short, descriptive pieces (which can be written and edited on a relaxed timeline, as long as they are not tied to a particular policy decision or window) and \$2,500 to \$5,000 for just-in-time analyses of pending policy proposals (which may run slightly longer and will require a faster turnaround to be relevant to decisionmakers).

We expect authors to be responsive and collaborative throughout the process. Payment will be issued upon publication. If for some reason we decide not to move forward with an essay, partial payment will be at Urban's discretion.