Testimony by Michael B. Horn, Executive Director of Education, Innosight Institute

Even as we have this conversation today about the importance of extending learning time for many—certainly not all, but many—U.S. students, the reality of what is happening outside this room and outside many of the efforts discussed today is that most districts and states are having to cut back. At the very point where we need many students to have extra hours of time spent learning, we are not just shedding extra hours, but we are actually shedding full days from the learning week. Districts—ranging from LA Unified to rural school districts here in New Mexico—all over the country have gone to or are considering 4-day weeks because of the budget crises facing them, with the result being that many students now get less time for learning than before, even when the evidence shows us so markedly that we need it to be the other way around.

So what do we do about this? Spending more money is not a solution because the reality is that we don't have more funds available. Municipalities, districts, and states are plunging right now into even greater fiscal crises, and this will not stop anytime soon, not to mention that the federal government is swimming in red ink. If the budget picture is not going to brighten anytime soon, is this hopeless?

Not at all. A solution exists that provides more learning time for those students who need it in a more flexible, cost-effective manner than the present system: online learning.

Online learning is a classic disruptive innovation. A disruptive innovation is one that transforms a sector by introducing simplicity, affordability, accessibility, greater decentralization and therefore more flexibility, and customization where before the sector's services were expensive, inaccessible, centralized, and inflexible. It initially takes root in narrow foothold areas where the alternative for users is nothing at all—places we call nonconsumption—and from there it improves and gains share as one by one users flock out to the disruption and the world is transformed. This is the process that has transformed computing into one where nearly everyone can afford a computing device, and it is the process that has brought affordability to cars so that nearly everyone can own one. It is taking place in education, and it has the potential to solve the dilemma of extending learning time for those who need it in a time of declining resources—as well as to transform the system into a far more student-centric one.

Online learning is first planting itself in these foothold areas where the alternative is literally nothing at all. For example, it is gaining traction in credit recovery and dropout recovery programs. For many students, when they fail a course, there is no way for them to make it up and recover the credits to graduate, and across the country, 30 percent of U.S. students dropout of school for a variety of reasons. Online learning is a welcome and affordable way to offer these students a way to get back on track in a convenient fashion that works for them.

Another place online learning is taking root is in the advanced courses that many schools—especially small, rural, and urban schools—are unable to offer. This doesn't just refer to

Advanced Placement courses, but instead impacts courses that many of us would consider core. Twenty-five percent of high schools do not offer an advanced course, defined as anything above geometry—so no algebra 2 or trigonometry or calculus; anything above biology—so no chemistry or physics; and any honors English class at all. There are certainly students in those schools, however, that would like or even need access to those courses, and so aggregating demand across many school districts and offering them online is a welcome solution.

At first glance, the budget crises facing districts are deeply threatening, as they have resulted in this loss of learning time. Seen from another perspective, however, they should in fact be a welcome opportunity to transform our education system into a more flexible one that can customize for different student needs and provide students with more learning time than is in fact possible in the conventional system, as the budget shortfalls will expand these areas of nonconsumption.

If schools need to cut back on the physical days in class to save dollars on building and transportation costs, there is no need the learning has to stop, too. Offer the students opportunities to learn online. This will not only prevent students from losing learning time, but it can also be an enormous opportunity and allow them to gain more time for learning, as online learning can in effect extend the day such that students can learn at any hour of the day any day of the week.

This can both save money and produce better results. To do this right, however, we must free districts from various restrictions that limit how they can use their funds such that they are able to move beyond regulations that tie funding to seat time, for example, and progress toward tying funding to successful outcomes. What will naturally happen if we tie funding to successful student outcomes in the online system—such that time is variable so learning is constant—is that those students that need more time for learning will have more time to learn. This will allow them to have more repetitions, different pathways through the learning materials, or more time on task such that they can realize the learning objectives before them. For those students who can breeze past something, they will be able to move on to the next concept or to various enrichment activities, which will be a great thing because it will keep them more engaged.

Ultimately, we are increasingly going to have to deliver more with less. Fortunately there is a path to do just that if we will take the first steps forward and stop the insanity of cutting back on learning time at the very point when we need to extend it for so many of our students. Online learning represents that path, as even in a time of fewer resources, it can allow us to deliver more time for learning and more successful results.