

Long Island School Districts Sue Social Media Platforms Alleging They Hurt Kids' Mental Health



Social media on Thursday, June 27, 2024. Credit: Randee Daddona

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Eleven Long Island school districts have sued Facebook and other leading social media companies this week, alleging the “addictive and dangerous” platforms have sparked an increase in mental health problems among students.

The school districts also allege the platforms have caused the districts “serious financial and resource disruptions.”

More than two dozen other districts across Long Island also intend to file similar lawsuits, according to William Shinoff, a San Diego, Calif.-based attorney who represents 37 Long Island districts and about 1,000 districts nationwide.

School officials are seeking money for added costs of employing mental health professionals, adapting lesson plans to educate children on alleged harm caused by social media and investigating online threats to the school communities.

“We have seen things posted and how disruptive they are to the school environment,” said Nicholas Ciappetta, president of the South Huntington Board of Education, in a telephone interview. “We want social media companies to take responsibility and to implement appropriate safeguards to ensure that they’re monitoring these types of things.”

The 11 districts each filed nearly identical five-page complaints that accuse the social media companies of negligence and being a public nuisance. The lawsuits, filed in federal court in California, also name Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube as defendants.

The districts' social media lawsuits are part of a consolidated multidistrict federal lawsuit in which parents, school districts and state governments are suing the companies for similar reasons.

Letitia James, New York state attorney general, and attorneys general from 32 other states filed similar suits in October 2023, alleging the companies created addictive features that have negatively affected young people's mental health.

The school districts say they are on "the front lines of redressing the damage" caused by companies' algorithms targeting children when they are "uniquely susceptible to addictive features in digital products and highly vulnerable to the resulting harm."

School districts filing suit are: Brentwood, Bellmore-Merrick, East Islip, Great Neck, Islip, Jericho, Kings Park, North Merrick, Port Jefferson, South Huntington and Westbury.

Their lawsuits come a little more than two weeks after the U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy called for a cigarette-style label on social media platforms warning they are "associated with significant mental health harms for adolescents."

Representatives for Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, and TikTok did not immediately return messages seeking comment. They denied Shinoff's allegations in similar lawsuits filed by other school districts nationwide.

A spokesperson for Snapchat, in response to the Long Island districts' lawsuits, said, "While we will always have more work to do, we feel good about the role Snapchat plays in helping close friends feel connected, happy and prepared as they face the many challenges of adolescence."

A spokesman for Google, which owns YouTube, called the allegations "simply not true."

"Providing young people with a safer, healthier experience has always been core to our work," he said. "In collaboration with youth, mental health and parenting experts, we built services and policies to provide young people with age-appropriate experiences, and parents with robust controls."

Jericho Superintendent Hank Grishman said in a telephone interview he is "most definitely" on alert about the impact social media is having on students in his district.

"The amount of time that our kids spend on social media is of concern, and the information that's available — some of the misinformation that's available on social media — that concerns me," Grishman said.

He said he also wants stronger safeguards governing social media companies from obtaining students' personal information and tracking their internet activity.

Shinoff, a trial lawyer at the Frantz Law Group, said districts want the social media companies to employ stronger age-verification processes and give parents and schools more ability to monitor children's access.

“They’re well aware of the harm they're doing,” he said, “and they're doing nothing to stop it.”