

PDSB among boards suing social media companies for 'disrupting student learning'?

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Ontario's largest school boards have sued the makers of Snapchat, TikTok, and Facebook and Instagram.

On March 28, the Peel District School Board (PDSB), Toronto District School Board (TDSB), Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) and Ottawa-Carleton District School Board began legal action against Meta Platforms Inc. (which owns Facebook and Instagram), Snap Inc. (which owns Snapchat), and ByteDance Ltd. (which owns TikTok).

The school boards claim the social media platforms are negligently designed to inspire compulsive use, and that the platforms have rewired the way children think, behave and learn.

The claims have yet to be tested in court.

Due to compulsive use of social media products, the school boards say students are experiencing an attention, learning and mental health crisis. The school boards claim there's been a rise in costs associated with this, such as the need for additional mental health programming and personnel and increased IT costs.

The school boards are seeking more than \$4 billion through the lawsuit and have retained Toronto-based firm Neinstein LLP to represent them.

A media release from Schools For Social Media Change, a 'group of school boards, Canadian leaders and organizations working together to strengthen our students' fundamental right to education' said the goal of the lawsuit is to provide school boards with the required resources to respond to school-based problems caused by social media.

The school boards also want to see the social media companies 'redesign their products to keep students safe.'

According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's 2021 Student Drug Use and Health Survey, 91 per cent of Ontario students in Grades 7 to 12 use social media daily. Of those students, 31 per cent use social media for five hours or more per day.

Data from that same survey shows 38 per cent of students report poor or fair mental health, and 26 per cent report they feel like they're in serious psychological distress.

The school boards said educators and administrators are spending time and resources to address issues caused by compulsive social media use. They said administrators are having to adjust curriculum to respond to an unfocused and inattentive student population, and that additional costs are being incurred to provide mental health support for students.

The school boards said there's been an increased need for digital literacy and online safety programming, and additional resources needed to investigate threats made against schools, staff and students on social media.

Additionally, the boards said there's been property damage and vandalism caused to schools by social media challenges, among other issues.

Rashmi Swarup, the PDSB's Director of Education, said there's been concern for years about the effect of social media on students' development, mental health, safety and emotional well-being.

Urgent action is needed to protect students from further harm. That is why we have come together in bringing action against social media giants to make their products safer while addressing the disruptions they are causing to our educational mandate," said Swarup.

Colleen Russell-Rawlins, the TDSB's Director of Education, said the influence of social media on today's youth can't be denied.

It leads to pervasive problems such as distraction, social withdrawal, cyberbullying, a rapid escalation of aggression, and mental health challenges," said Russell-Rawlins. "Therefore, it is imperative that we take steps to ensure the well-being of our youth. We are calling for measures to be implemented to mitigate these harms and prioritize the mental health and academic success of our future generation."

TCDSB Director of Education Brendan Browne said the "intricately crafted and inherently addictive" nature of social media platforms can be a detriment to a student's ability to absorb knowledge.

Social media has an undeniable toll on student mental health which cannot be overlooked. In the absence of effective measures from the architects of these digital platforms, our educators find themselves increasingly involved in mitigating social media-induced matters, diverting precious time away from academic instruction," said Browne.

Duncan Embury, a partner and the head of litigation at Neinstein LLP, said the firm is proud to support the school boards in their goal of holding social media companies accountable.

A strong education system is the foundation of our society and our community. Social media products and the changes in behaviour, judgement and attention that they cause pose a threat to that system and to the student population our schools serve," said Embury.