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Aspen School District sues social media companies over impact on youth mental health



By Paolo Zialcita · Jun. 21, 2023, 9:25 am

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Aspen School District, which has more than 3,000 enrolled students, is joining a nationwide trend of school districts suing a variety of social media companies over their perceived role in harming youth mental health.

The lawsuit, filed in the United States District Court for the District of Colorado, alleges several social media companies, including YouTube, TikTok and Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, maximized user engagement at the detriment of young users.

“Our kids are really hurting these days, and social media has really set up their platforms to kind of hook the kids and really just get them addicted to social media,” Aspen superintendent Dave Baugh told CPR News. “We feel like it's taken a lot of our time and energy to try to help kids navigate that, to manage it and to recover from it.”

Baugh and ASD are seeking an unspecified amount of monetary relief from each company. Baugh said the district has had to hire extra counselors at each school to deal with the “epidemic of depression, loneliness and isolation.”

“There's a substantial payroll cost on the administrative level,” he said. “It's been just getting worse and worse each year.”

The only dollar amount outlined in the lawsuit is a request for general monetary damages in excess of \$75,000. That figure is the minimum required to file a suit in district court, and it's unclear what exactly the money would go toward if awarded.

In the lawsuit, ASD claims it has a valid reason to sue because social media companies are willfully creating a public nuisance and operating with negligence. A large portion of the suit contains background information about the history of each company, as well as leaked internal documents.

Derigan Silver, the chair of the Department of Media, Film and Journalism Studies at the University of Denver, studies media and internet law. He said the recent trend of lawsuits against social media from school districts is a relatively new phenomenon, as is the effort to prove social media companies are endangering children to increase engagement.

years ago, showing that tobacco companies had actually done lots of studies to show that smoking was not just harmful to individuals, but that it was very harmful to minors,” Silver said.

In addition to internal documents, the lawsuit cites comments by Facebook whistleblower [Frances Haugen](#), who testified in front of the U.S. Senate about her time as a data scientist at the company. She told lawmakers that Facebook executives knew the company’s strategy would likely harm the mental health of vulnerable groups, particularly teenage girls.

Multiple public figures, including [Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser](#), and [U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy](#), have singled out social media companies as a driving force behind the youth mental health crisis.

That criticism of social media and its effect on children has trickled down to local communities, and ASD is one of several school districts around the country filing lawsuits against social media giants. The first was [filed in Seattle at the start of 2023](#). Marc Bern, whose firm is representing Aspen, said he expects the number of complaints will grow exponentially.

“This is just the beginning of this litigation,” Bern said. “I think that this is probably one of the most important litigations, not only from the standpoint of the financial harm to the school districts and other plaintiffs, but to the individual children in this country.”

Bern would not speculate on how much money ASD could get if they win their lawsuit. However, he said if the trickle of nationwide lawsuits continues and proves successful, he believes social media companies could be liable for “if not tens of billions, hundreds of billions of dollars in additional educational costs”.

Bern said he’s already received inquiries from other Colorado school districts about filing similar litigation to Aspen. He would not say which could be next.

Editor's note: *The original version of this story incorrectly identified Aspen School District as Aspen Public Schools. The error has been corrected.*