

YCDSB joins lawsuit against Meta, citing students' social media addiction?

The York Catholic District School Board has joined a multi-billion-dollar and multi-school board lawsuit against Meta, the company following such popular social media platforms as Instagram and Facebook, as well as Snapchat and TikTok.

The YCDSB is the latest Board to join in the growing suit that calls on social media platforms and their providers to "make their products safer" and compensate school boards for the "disruption" to their mandate.

In a joint letter, Elizabeth Crowe, Chair of the YCDSB and Interim Director of Education John De Faveri said the platforms are not only having a negative impact on students, they're "rewiring the way they think, act, behave and learn."

"As a result, educators are spending increased classroom time managing issues caused by social media, administrators are forced to rework curriculum to meet the adapting needs of a student body with significant attention, focus, and mental health concerns, and the changing behavioural dynamics of the student population are causing significant shifts in the educational landscape and huge strains on school boards' finite resources," they said.

"The impact of social media products on student learning is a multifaceted problem that requires a multipronged approach. This action will work in concert with new policy proposed by the provincial government to limit devices in the classroom. Restricting the use of devices in schools is one piece of the puzzle, but as we know, compulsive social media use outside the classroom will continue to permeate the education system and impact student learning."

Mark Brosens, Senior Communications Director for the YCDSB, told The Auroran last week that the Board has been studying the facts around the lawsuit "for quite a while" and wanted to ensure "we were doing all the proper research that was needed to ensure it was the right action for us" before joining the litigation.

"I think if you look at news reporting and conversations parents are having across the country, we're seeing everything from an increased amount of depression and anxiety in young people, all the way to sexual exploitation of both boys and girls in Canada? both of those things by themselves are quite troubling and at the school level you're also seeing increased behavioural issues, teachers having to spend more time dealing with students who have addictions to social media products and are having problems concentrating," he said.

"School boards across the country are talking about damaged caused by social media challenges. It creates an entire situation that is really difficult for schools to manage and it has created a number of costs that school boards have to bear. What we're saying is social media companies should first of all help school boards recoup those costs, but more importantly they should be changing their product to ensure it has less of a negative health and wellbeing impact on young people."

Citing statistics from CAMH, Brosens says nearly a third of students have been found on social media for more than five hours a day and one in ten young people "feel anxious and uneasy when they don't have their cell phone on them."

"We hear from educators and staff that students are depressed, anxious, they're dealing with cyber-bullying," he says. "We as a board have had to increase the amount of training that we've had to give to our staff on being aware and mitigating the effects of sexual exploitation because of what's happening on social media across the country. We have a psychology and mental health department in the YCDSB and they are incredible, hard-working people and they are struggling to keep up with the number of cases that are coming to them.

"Social media isn't the only thing that is causing these problems, but what we're saying is that social media companies have created a product that intentionally rewards compulsive behaviour and, as a result of that, students have been given a product that is not good for their mental health and wellbeing, it doesn't provide them a safe space in the digital world, and we can look at other jurisdictions around the world that are putting measures in as a result of legislation that are making this a better place for young people. School

boards can help lead the charge for creating a safer space for students online, we're happy to do that.?

Boards, he stresses, aren't opposed to social media in and of itself ?we feel it is here to stay? ? but they want a product that is more ?beneficial,? particularly for young people. The algorithm on Facebook, for example, is, he claimed, ?an attempt to give one dopamine hit after another.?

?We don't have any problems with social media as a way to connect with each other and as a way to build community; what we would like to see is a social media product that wasn't trying to create compulsive behaviours in those who use it. More than anything, we want to make sure that the mental health wellbeing and safety of our young people is protected in a digital space. We compliment all the other efforts that are being done at the moment such as those by the Provincial government to ban cell phones in the classroom, but what we need to have now is a larger, multi-faceted approach to solve social media's harms for young people because social media affects every aspect of their lives. We need a structural change to ensure our kids remain safe.?

By Brock Weir