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## **Seattle Public Schools Files Suit Against Social Media Companies for Creating a Youth Mental Health Crisis**

On Friday, Seattle Public Schools took the first step towards holding social media companies accountable for the harm they have wreaked on the social, emotional, and mental health of its students by filing a lawsuit against the companies operating TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, SnapChat, and YouTube.

Students in the Seattle Public Schools, like students around the country, are struggling with anxiety, depression, thoughts of self-harm, and suicidal ideation, which led King County to join the U.S. Surgeon General last year in recognizing the youth mental health crisis in this community. According to the Surgeon General, one in five children aged 13 to 17 now suffer from a mental health disorder.

The increase in suicides, attempted suicides, and mental-health related ER visits is no coincidence. As alleged in the complaint, this crisis was already growing before the pandemic and research has identified social media as playing a major role in causing mental health problems in youth. More than 90% of youth today use social media. Most youth primarily use five platforms: YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook, on which they spend many hours a day. Research tells us that excessive and problematic use of social media is harmful to the mental, behavioral, and emotional health of youth and is associated with increased rates of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, eating disorders, and suicide.

The evidence is equally clear that social media companies have designed their platforms to maximize the time youth spend using them and addict youth to their platforms, as alleged in the complaint. These companies have been wildly successful in attracting young users. As of last year, almost 50 percent of teenagers in the state spent between one and three hours a day on social media and 30 percent averaged more than three hours a day.

School districts like Seattle Public Schools have been significantly impacted by the resulting crisis. Like school districts across the country, Seattle Public Schools' schools and school-based clinics are one of the main providers of mental health services for school-aged children in the community. But the school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses need greater resources to meet the high demand for services.

According to Superintendent Brent Jones, "It has become increasingly clear that many children are burdened by mental health challenges. Our students - and young people everywhere - face unprecedented, learning and life struggles that are amplified by the negative impacts of increased screen time, unfiltered content, and potentially addictive properties of social media. We are confident and hopeful that this lawsuit is the first step toward reversing this trend for our students, children throughout Washington state, and the entire country."

While the King County Council recently allocated additional resources for school-based services, taxpayers should not bear the burden for the mental health crisis social media companies have created, as explained in the complaint. This lawsuit aims to hold these companies accountable for their actions and set youth mental health trends back on the right trajectory. As School Board President Brandon Hersey explained, “Our first and greatest priority is the health and well-being of our students. Clearly, this includes the social and emotional harm that they suffer because of the negative impacts of social media. By taking aim at the social media companies, we are sending a clear message that it is time for them to prioritize the health of children over the revenues they make from advertising.”

Seattle Public Schools has retained Keller Rohrback as outside counsel. Keller Rohrback is a nationally recognized law firm based in Seattle that routinely litigates against the largest corporate defendants in the country on behalf of school districts and local governments.