

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **HARFORD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS FILE LAWSUIT AGAINST SOCIAL MEDIA CORPORATIONS FOR ROLE IN YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS**

*Lawsuit seeks accountability for social media companies' addictive products that are harming students, damaging mental health, and increasing burdens for school districts*

**BEL AIR, MD** – The Harford County Public Schools today filed a lawsuit against social media companies Meta, Google, ByteDance, and Snap Inc. alleging that their addictive products are increasing the youth mental health crisis for its student body of nearly 40,000 children and placing an increasingly large burden on the school system to provide adequate and essential mental health resources. Students are struggling more than ever with their mental health amid excessive use of the platforms.

Harford County joins school districts across the country alleging that students are facing a mental health crisis due to defendants' social media products designed to target and addict children, as well as the companies' advertising-based business models that enable them to profit off that addiction. The social media companies promote their platforms – Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok – to children, and make huge profits from doing so, leaving schools to bear the brunt of the addiction crisis.

The algorithms driving these platforms are designed to exploit young users' brains in a way comparable to nicotine use to manipulate users into staying on the platform as long as possible. The social media platforms hijack tweens' and teens' compulsion to connect and feel accepted. The school district alleges that defendants have known about these negative impacts but have continued to prioritize profit over the safety and well-being of children.

As a result of this addiction crisis, the Harford County school system faces the challenge of providing sufficient mental health resources to its student body as rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation continue to climb. Schools, meant to be a safe space for children, are now unable to keep up with the mental health service demand. With funding already stretched thin, the school board struggles to find resources to allocate to the essential mental health needs of students. Instead of spending on essential education needs, the school district has had to reallocate funds to combat the harms caused by social media. Through this lawsuit, the Board is seeking to change the way the platforms exploit teens and obtain funds to address this crisis from those responsible, rather than continuing to place that burden on taxpayers.

“For too long these companies have exploited developing minds, contributing to a youth mental health crisis nationwide. Schools feel the burden when kids come to school struggling to focus, depressed, and in need of intensive mental health services,” said Bernard Hennigan, Executive Director of Student Services for Harford County Public Schools. “We want our kids to be happy and healthy in order to learn and receive the

best education they can. But our students and kids across the country are facing unprecedented mental health and learning struggles triggered by addiction to social media and its harmful algorithms and features. These companies must be held accountable for their piece in this youth crisis.”

The Harford County Public Schools are represented in the lawsuit by Baird Mandalas Brockstedt Federico & Cardea of Baltimore and Delaware and Lieff Cabraser Heimann & Bernstein, Co-Lead Counsel in the nationwide Multi-District Litigation against these companies. The firms work on a contingency basis, meaning there will be no cost to taxpayers.

“This lawsuit seeks two things: force social media companies to make changes to their platforms for the well-being of our kids and hold these mega-social media companies accountable for the high costs associated with addressing the mental health problems impacting our students,” said Dr. Carol Mueller, President of the Board of Education of Harford County. “Schools across the country, just like here in Harford County, are struggling to keep up with student needs while also providing high-quality education and a good learning environment. We need the support and long-term funding to remove the financial burden from taxpayers and instead place it on the companies substantially contributing to and benefiting from this crisis.”

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