

‘Teachers Are Going to Hate It’: How Social Media Apps Hooked Teens at School

Jennifer Valentino-DeVries

Advertisement

[SKIP ADVERTISEMENT](#)

Internal documents show how tech giants grabbed children’s attention throughout the day, a strategy that schools say has undermined education.

Listen · 16:26 min



Social media companies’ push to reach students has often overshadowed concerns from parents and teachers. Credit... Yana Paskova for The New York Times

Published June 4, 2026 Updated June 9, 2026

Snapchat sent [phone alerts](#) to adolescents during school hours, urging them to share what was going on in their classrooms.

Meta paid “[teen ambassadors](#)” to promote Instagram and hand out swag to their friends at school.

TikTok gave the National PTA [millions of dollars](#), in part to throw school events about online safety and provide favorable comments to journalists.

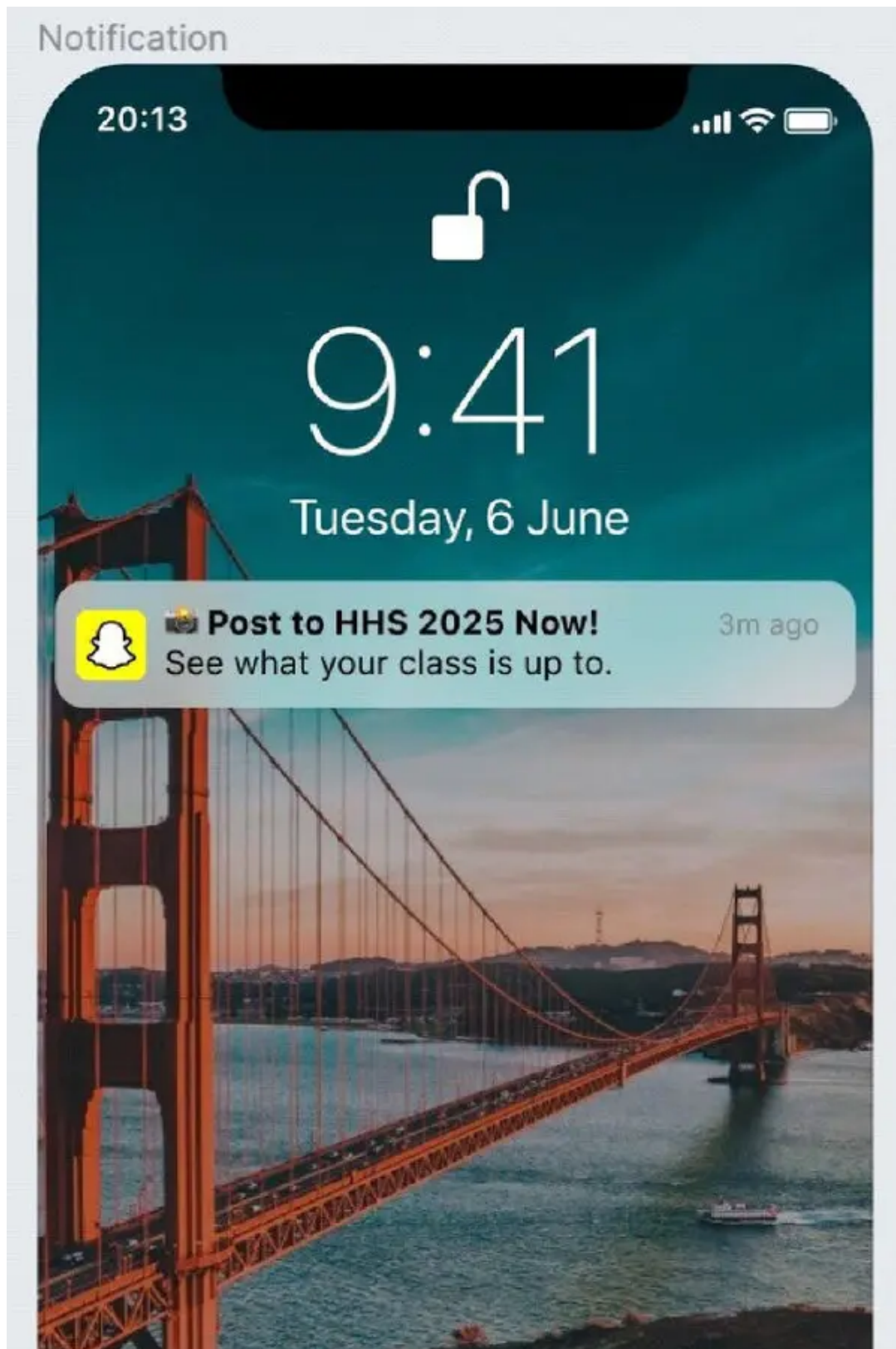
Again and again, the world’s leading social media companies have targeted students, even as complaints have mounted that they are hurting teenagers’ mental health and academic performance, according to a New York Times review of internal documents that lay bare for the first time these tactics to hook young users.

The documents emerged from lawsuits filed by more than 1,400 school districts against Meta, Snap, TikTok and YouTube amid a rising backlash against social media, with parent movements and best-selling books blaming the platforms for loneliness, bullying, eating disorders and sexual exploitation.

The outcry, long focused on social media’s harm to mental health, has now shifted to its upending of the classroom.

Many school districts are banning smartphones, and some are re-evaluating their reliance on [devices like Chromebooks](#), the inexpensive laptops made by YouTube's parent company, Google.

Image



A mockup from a Snap document disclosed in court. Snapchat sent alerts to students urging them to post from school. Credit...U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California

The companies' push to keep children glued to their screens has overshadowed concerns from parents, teachers and even their own trust and safety teams about interfering with school, according to the documents and interviews with dozens of parents, teachers and former tech company employees.

TikTok's leaders decided [not to disable](#) notifications during school hours, rejecting a change that its safety teams had

pushed for years. A Snapchat strategy document referred to classroom phone use as “[under the desk](#)” time. Google managers knew YouTube was [recommending videos](#) to students during the school day that had nothing to do with their lessons.

The school districts contend that the apps’ addictive designs made teachers’ jobs more difficult. “It is so constantly tempting to these kids to be on a platform that promises endless, infinite, varied entertainment rather than actually focusing on what they should be at school to do,” said Previn Warren, one of the lead lawyers for the schools.

The companies argue that the Covid pandemic and other factors have harmed adolescents’ mental health, and that parents, schools and cellphone makers bear responsibility for children’s phone habits. They also say that they have made their platforms safer with parental-control features and account restrictions for minors.

All four companies recently settled with Breathitt County Schools, a small district in rural Kentucky that served as a test case for the litigation nationwide. The district, which has about 1,500 students, had sought \$3 million in damages and about \$60 million that it had planned to put toward a long-term education and mental health plan. The companies agreed to pay Breathitt \$27 million: \$9 million from Meta, \$8 million each from Snap and TikTok and \$2 million from Google, according to [documents](#) released on Friday and first reported by [Bloomberg](#).

While it’s hard to say how the ongoing litigation might ultimately affect classrooms, it poses a substantial financial risk to the companies, possibly costing billions of dollars, said Alexandra Lahav, a civil litigation professor at Cornell Law School. She noted that the companies were also facing a [barrage of claims](#) from families and state attorneys general.

Breathitt was the first of six so-called bellwether cases, whose outcomes are likely to guide the rest. The next plaintiff in line for trial, Tucson Unified School District in Arizona, which has about 40,000 students, is seeking more than \$1 billion.

“These are massive, massive lawsuits,” Ms. Lahav said.

Winning with Teens

In the early days of social media, before the industry came under angry public scrutiny, some company leaders were candid about their pursuit of teenagers — a key demographic that they knew could drive the next hit app and yield lifelong users.

In 2012, a few months after the launch of Snapchat, its co-founder Evan Spiegel, then 21, wrote a [blog post](#) about feedback he had heard from some of the app’s early users.

“We were thrilled to hear that most of them were high school students who were using Snapchat as a new way to pass notes in class,” Mr. Spiegel wrote, indicating that “peaks of activity” occurred during school hours.

Meta also tried to promote its brand in schools, desperate to keep young users from leaving its flagship apps, Facebook and Instagram, for competitors.

“Winning schools is the way to win with teens,” read an internal [document](#) from 2018.

Beginning that year, the company recruited teen [ambassadors](#) to “act as our plug at local high schools within five key markets.” The students received branded gear to share, and they earned \$45 gift cards for completing monthly challenges, such as posting Instagram video chats with friends.

Leia Immanuel, a former teen ambassador who is now an artist in New York City, said her Instagram followers supported her when she was bullied at school. But she now feels conflicted about the role she played in encouraging other young people to use the platform.

“In recent years I have been rethinking it,” she said. She still feels addicted to posting online and believes it is unhealthy. “I didn’t understand that at 14.”

Meta said its outreach efforts at schools, including the ambassadors program, had largely focused on promoting kindness and soliciting feedback on new products.

“We proudly work with parents, schools, safety organizations and teens themselves to inform safety features,” said Liza Crenshaw, a spokeswoman for Meta. She added that some of the documents produced in the lawsuit represented

the ideas of individuals, not the company.

Image



ambassador of the month swag

An image from court documents of Meta swag for teen ambassadors of the month. Credit...U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California

Google employees cited classrooms as a source of long-term customers. A 2020 [slide deck](#) said that “investing in schools helps onboard kids into Google’s ecosystem.”

With its Chromebook laptops and software tailored for schools, [Google has come to dominate](#) the education technology market over the past 15 years. That business boomed during the pandemic, as many districts provided students with their own devices for remote learning. The majority of U.S. schools now use Google products to teach.

Members of the company’s education department were often excited about products they thought could improve learning, such as affordable laptops and educational YouTube videos, according to court documents and interviews. They worked alongside product managers, however, who were focused on a different upside: increasing YouTube’s viewership.

Got a confidential news tip? The New York Times would like to hear from readers who want to share messages and materials with our journalists.

In one 2015 [memo](#), YouTube employees noted that Saturdays drew 80 million hours’ more watch time than Thursdays, and that “increasing usage in schools M-F could decrease this gap!”

It was clear even back then that YouTube was proving problematic for schools, according to documents previously reported by [NBC News](#) and [The Wall Street Journal](#). The company’s education team repeatedly complained that the algorithm often led children into a spiral of unrelated content.

One [slide presentation](#) illustrated how this could happen. If someone began a YouTube session with a query about linear equations, the platform would first offer a learning video, the presentation showed. But after that, the algorithm would recommend a Will Ferrell comedy video.

A Google spokesman said the documents were outdated. In 2022, the company released a tool that allows teachers to remove ads and recommendations on videos they assign students to watch, said the spokesman, José Castañeda. He also said that YouTube could be blocked, and that browsing on the site had been turned off by default on school Chromebooks for a decade.

But teachers and parents said that even when YouTube and other sites were blocked, students used internet proxies and other workarounds. And schools often allowed YouTube browsing so children could do research, which Google said highlighted its educational value but which made policing its use more difficult.

Image



Joanna Houston had a meeting with her son's principal in February after discovering the amount of noneducational YouTube content he was consuming during school hours. Credit...Kristen Zeis for The New York Times

Joanna Houston, the mother of a sixth grader in Richmond Hill, Ga., said her son had watched more than 1,500 noneducational YouTube videos on his Chromebook during school between August and January.

She was concerned that her son's school had embraced Chromebooks and YouTube, but she blamed Google for marketing to schools and making it so easy to mindlessly consume its content.

"It's this whole ecosystem that ultimately benefits this company, and I don't think it very much benefits students," she

said.

‘The #1 Cause of Drama’

The companies heard complaints not only from parents and teachers but from their own internal trust and safety teams.

At a conference on student safety in 2023, Snap representatives met with education officials from across the United States. According to [internal emails](#), school administrators there raised alarms about their experiences with Snapchat — including children as young as 9 sending nude pictures.

A superintendent from Alabama told the executives that he had [warned about the app](#) in a newsletter to parents, which he shared with them. “Snapchat is the #1 cause of drama in school aged children,” it said, citing bullying and inappropriate images. “If YOU want to protect your child, make them delete it.”

That same year, a Snap employee pushed back against a new feature that sent high school students phone notifications during the day. The alerts urged the adolescents to share what was in their backpack or what their class was up to.

The [employee](#) said that children should be able to opt out of the notifications to “avoid legal risks around dark patterns” — a term referring to manipulative design features. The suggestion was not taken.

A Snap spokeswoman said that the company was pleased to have resolved the Breathitt lawsuit amicably and that many of the documents showed the company was listening to feedback.

“We do not target schools,” said Monique Bellamy, the spokeswoman, adding that Snapchat is simply popular among teenagers. “We care deeply about the safety and well-being of all Snapchatters, and our teams have worked for years to raise the bar on safety.”

At TikTok, some employees warned that frequent interruptions in the classroom would lead to a backlash.

“Teachers are going to hate it,” [an employee wrote](#) in 2022 to an internal group focused on child safety, referring to a new feature prodding users to post within the next three minutes. “Kids already have smartphone addiction in class.”

In response, a manager said the team’s job was to support as well as challenge the business. Competitors, she said, were doing the same thing.

“If we assume teens are going to do this anyway, we’d rather them be here on TikTok,” she wrote. The company removed the feature in 2023.

Image



In 2022, TikTok debuted a new feature urging users to post within the next three minutes. Credit...Patrick T. Fallon/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

That same year, TikTok considered turning off notifications altogether for minors during school hours, but the plan was scrapped. Internal [documents](#) about the feature noted it would reduce the number of daily active users and would be difficult for the company to administer because of the variety of school schedules.

TikTok declined to comment on the internal documents about app features that affected children in school. A spokeswoman said the app had dozens of privacy and safety settings, including parental controls.

PTA ‘Propaganda’

Leading technology companies have [long partnered](#) with parent-teacher associations to burnish their reputations and promote internet safety. But the new documents show how the National PTA, a nonprofit that represents some 22,000 local chapters, actively solicited such contracts.

In a [2024 email](#) pitching its services to Snap, the National PTA promised it could “help with sentiment” and create “more understanding and comfort” among parents. (Snap ultimately declined to offer funding.)

Exactly how much the National PTA has received from social media companies remains secret, but some details emerged in the documents. In 2024, a National PTA official told Snap executives that companies generally paid the organization \$250,000 to \$500,000 a year, and that a handful gave millions of dollars a year.

“Parents, students and school communities rely on PTA to help them navigate the challenges of a changing world,” said Heidi May Wilson, a spokeswoman for the National PTA, in a statement responding to questions about the lawsuit documents. “That includes technology and social media, which are now central parts of children’s lives.”

TikTok signed the first of several contracts with the group in 2019, just as the app’s thriving business in America was coming under fire. Prominent lawmakers like Senator Marco Rubio had accused its Chinese parent company, ByteDance, of censorship, painting it as a propaganda tool of the Chinese Communist Party.

The deal with the National PTA aimed to “positively raise ByteDance’s profile among parents,” according to a PTA slide deck for the company that was quoted in a plaintiff brief.

In [November 2019](#), a National PTA employee asked its new sponsor where it should host an internet safety event. In emails, TikTok employees discussed that the ideal schools would be in “major market media centers” and “sensitive political districts.”

Tampa, which was represented by Mr. Rubio and had the most populous TV viewing area in Florida, met both criteria. The National PTA gave a county chapter \$1,000 to put on the event at Buchanan Middle School.



In early 2020, the National PTA gave a county chapter \$1,000 to put on a TikTok event at Buchanan Middle School in Tampa, Fla. Credit...Hillsborough County Council PTA's Facebook page

In addition to about 75 parents and children, local TV reporters showed up to the cafeteria event in February 2020. Surrounded by balloons with TikTok's logo, parents talked about screen-time rules, and a panel of students answered questions. A local influencer said that TikTok had helped her build a career traveling the world.

While many parents appreciated that the event helped them talk about social media with their children, the influencer's presence felt like "propaganda," said Damaris Allen, who was then the chapter president. "I just remember being very, very annoyed."

Later that year, TikTok gave the National PTA \$2 million for support during the pandemic. It paid another [\\$3 million in 2024](#) for the group to promote the company's youth safety efforts, including providing "positive" quotes to news outlets. The TikTok spokeswoman said the company was proud to fund the organization.

In December of last year, a publication in northeast Ohio covered a [TikTok-sponsored event](#) about online safety. A National PTA representative told the outlet: "It was important for the youth to illustrate how they use platforms and how they use TikTok for good."

Michael H. Keller contributed reporting. Julie Tate contributed research.

A version of this article appears in print on June 7, 2026, Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: At School, Apps Pushed Teens to Stay on Screens. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

Advertisement

[SKIP ADVERTISEMENT](#)