

Dover Union Free School District

Mental Health Training Component of the New York SAVE Act

JUNE 2022



OFFICE OF THE NEW YORK STATE COMPTROLLER
Thomas P. DiNapoli, State Comptroller

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Report Highlights

Dover Union Free School District

Audit Objective

Determine whether the Dover Union Free School District (District) used District resources to provide the mental health component of the New York Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act (SAVE Act) training requirement to staff.

Key Findings

The District did not provide mental health training to any staff for the 2020-21 school year by September 15, 2020 as required by New York State Education Department (SED) regulations.

- None of the 12 recommended components of mental health that educators should know were included in the District's training.

Key Recommendation

Provide mental health training to all staff and ensure it is completed by September 15, as required. Such training should address recognition of the warning signs, whom to turn to for assistance, and how to access appropriate services.

District officials agreed with our recommendation and indicated they will take corrective action.

Background

The District is located in Dutchess County, and is governed by an elected nine-member Board of Education (Board).

The Board is responsible for the general management of the District.

The Superintendent serves at the Board's direction and is responsible for day-to-day management.

The Superintendent is the Chief Emergency Officer and is responsible for coordinating emergency plan training for staff, however, the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Technology and Staff Development (Assistant Superintendent) assumed these duties during our audit period.

Quick Facts

2020-2021 School Year

Staff	324
Students	1,342
School Buildings	3

Audit Period

July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021

As described in Appendix B, for certain training material we extended the audit period.

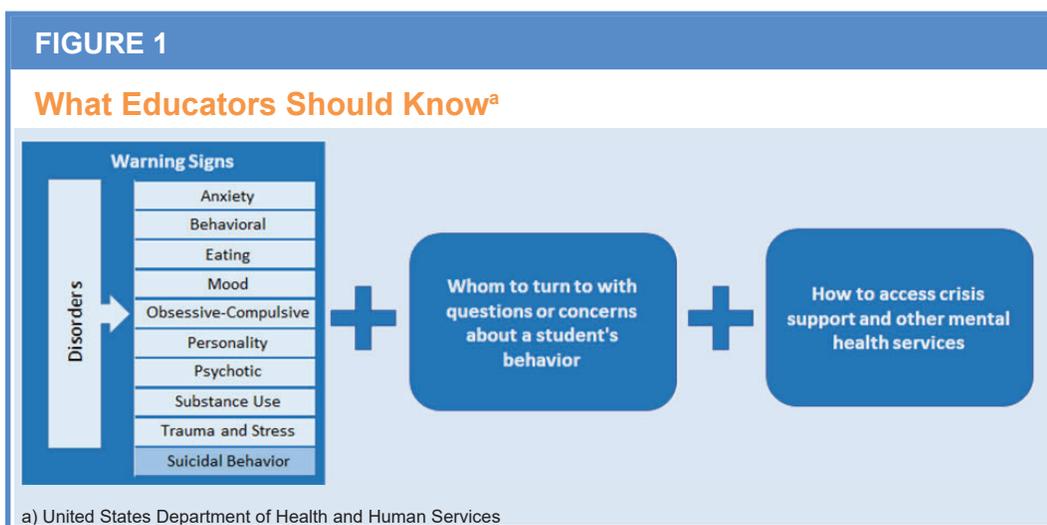
Mental Health Training

The SAVE Act was introduced to help improve school safety. The SAVE Act requires school districts to develop a comprehensive district-wide school safety plan (safety plan) that addresses crisis intervention, emergency responses and management. The safety plan developed by each district must include, among other things, policies and procedures for annual school safety training for staff and students. School districts must certify to the SED Commissioner that all staff have undergone the school safety training, which must include a component on mental health.¹ SED requires that the certification to the SED Commissioner states that all staff have undergone the annual training by September 15 of each year.

What Is the Mental Health Component of the SAVE Act Training for All Staff?

The SAVE Act requires all districts to provide staff annual emergency response plan training with a component on mental health. School personnel are often the first to notice mental health problems, and, to support the mental health of a district's students.

While the SAVE Act and SED requirements state that the annual school safety training must include a component on mental health, neither the SAVE Act nor SED requirements directly address what topics should be included within the mental health training component. Rather, SED issued guidance to all school districts that included resources relating to mental health. Included within the resources was information from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) addressing "what educators should know" regarding warning signs of mental health problems, "whom to turn to," and "how to access crisis support and other mental health services" (Figure 1).



1 8 NYCRR Section 155.17[c][1][xiii]

Based on SED guidance, as a best practice, at a minimum staff should be trained on the DHHS recommended mental health components of “what educators should know.”

District Training Did Not Include Recommended Mental Health Components

The previous Superintendent certified to SED that by September 1, 2020, all staff received training on the emergency response plan, which must also include a component of mental health.

However, our review of the training records and materials presented by officials found the District did not provide training to any staff on a component of mental health as a requirement of the annual emergency response plan training.

The District provided training on “What Life After COVID-19 Looks Like” to staff and told us it contained components of mental health training. We reviewed the materials presented for this training and found none of the 12 recommended mental health components were included (Figure 2).

The District also provided training on the topics of bullying, child abuse and sexual harassment through online courses. However, we did not consider the content of these online courses to satisfy the requirements on providing training on a component of mental health because they focused on recognizing bullying, child abuse and sexual harassment and its effects, not mental health disorders or behaviors. The video presentation on “What Life After COVID-19 Looks Like” was only presented to the middle school faculty and did not include any of the 12 recommended mental health components.

The Superintendent explained he was not in the position of District Superintendent when the training was due in September 2020. The Assistant Superintendent told us she was unaware of the SAVE Act requirement for all staff to receive mental health training by September 15.

Figure 2: District’s “What Life After COVID-19 Looks Like” Training

Mental Health Components	Included
Whom to Turn to	X
How to Access Support and Services	X
Warning Signs	
Anxiety Disorders	X
Behavioral Disorders	X
Eating Disorders	X
Mood Disorders	X
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder	X
Personality Disorders	X
Psychotic Disorders	X
Substance Use Disorders	X
Suicidal Behavior	X
Trauma and Stress Related Disorders	X

It is imperative, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, that staff be provided training on warning signs that may be an early indicator of mental health issues and concerns. Training staff can assist in identifying mental health issues in students early on to get help when needed and potentially avoid having to react to crisis situations or emergencies.

What Do We Recommend?

District officials must:

1. Provide mental health training to all staff and ensure it is completed by September 15, as required. Such training should address recognition of the warning signs, whom to turn to for assistance, and how to access appropriate services.

Appendix A: Response From District Officials

DOVER UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT

2368 ROUTE 22

DOVER PLAINS, NEW YORK 12522

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January 28, 2022

The Dover Union Free School District is in agreement that it did not meet the date requirement set forth in the Commissioner's Regulations; however, the District would like to convey several key points with regard to this audit:

The audit period was limited to July 1, 2020 – September 15, 2020. As noted in the audit report, I began in the district in April of 2021 and appreciated being a part of the audit discussion and new learnings. The beginning school and this time-block was the time period leading up to the reopening of school after the pandemic forced the closing of March, 2020. Contractually, the District cannot mandate staff to complete training prior to the start of the school year; therefore, with teachers scheduled to return on August 31, 2020, the opportunity for this training was limited to less than two weeks to meet the deadline. The district prioritized physical and social/emotional safety to allow for students and staff to return to school in person in September. During this time, it was necessary to get staff up to speed with all COVID protocols and procedures (for themselves and the students), as well as address the high levels of anxiety in staff, parents and students. To this end, our district was successful.

Thank you for the input regarding this important professional development mandate for our staff/faculty. We have a comprehensive training program, which will include a more explicit addition relative to the Mental Health component. Please note the following points as our staff, faculty, students, and community mental health is paramount:

The District provided individual and group support to all stakeholders to make them feel as comfortable as possible to return to school during this highly unstable time. Concerns for physical and emotional safety were addressed by district and building administrators, health staff and support staff, as well as providing referrals to professionals in the field (Employee Assistance Program, health organizations, community organizations, etc.).

During opening staff meetings, building leaders and support staff educated the staff to look for any warning signs of disorders such as depression and anxiety; they were given information about whom they should turn to with questions or concerns regarding students who may be exhibiting concerning behaviors.

The district prioritized physical and social/emotional safety to allow for students and staff to return to school in person in September. During this time, it was

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DOVER PLAINS, NEW YORK 12522

necessary to get staff up to speed with all COVID protocols and procedures (for themselves and the students), as well as address the high levels of anxiety in staff, parents and students.

Throughout the audit, the auditors were helpful with providing respective links to drive our Mental Health training for the upcoming school year. I requested some examples from districts that met the threshold of approval. Unlike many of the other mandates, there is not a “one-stop” type of presentation; rather various sources are provided, which we will examine and create something for our system.

Lastly, this summer (2021), we sent 30-employees to be trained in Mental Health First Aid. These staff had a highly-comprehensive and nationally recognized training, culminating in certification.

Moving forward, mental health training will be conducted prior to the September 15th deadline. While the District understands the importance of this training, New York State continues to add annual educational requirements that must be met by all school districts; the time required for these trainings continues to grow. It would be very beneficial for school districts to have some of these trainings required every other year, rather than annually (while still providing all training to new staff members). This would allow for more in-depth, meaningful training on these important topics. Another consideration is to extend the mental health training deadline to later in the school year or allow the training to occur throughout the school year.

Thank you for your time and input. We look forward to incorporating these professional opportunities and mandates into our system moving forward.

Respectfully,

Dr. David Fine

Appendix B: Audit Methodology and Standards

We conducted this audit pursuant to Article V, Section 1 of the State Constitution and the State Comptroller’s authority as set forth in Article 3 of the New York State General Municipal Law. To accomplish our audit objective and obtain relevant audit evidence, our procedures included the following steps:

- We selected the District for audit using a random number generator applied to a list of districts, broken out by five geographic regions (excluding NYC schools), not currently in the OSC audit process at the time of selection. The list was broken out by geographic region for an even representation of school districts across the State for this multi-unit audit.
- We interviewed District officials to gain an understanding of the process for creating, disseminating and monitoring mental health training for staff.
- We reviewed relevant State laws and regulations, and guidance from SED and the United States Department of Health and Human Services. We reviewed District policies to gain an understanding of required mental health training.
- We reviewed Board minutes for the 2020-21 school year to determine the Board action taken related to the District-wide safety plan or required mental health training.
- We requested and reviewed records supporting the District’s 2020-21 certification to SED that required annual training with a component of mental health.
- We reviewed and tested the mental health training materials provided by the District to determine if training on mental health followed guidance. We extended the scope forward to November 15, 2021 to include the date the auditor observed training material – “What Life After COVID-19 Looks Like.”
- We determined the total number of individuals employed by the District during our audit period by obtaining and reviewing an employee listing.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS). Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.

The Board has the responsibility to initiate corrective action. A written corrective action plan (CAP) that addresses the findings and recommendations in this report must be prepared and provided to our office within 90 days, pursuant to Section 35 of General Municipal Law, Section 2116-a (3)(c) of New York State Education Law and Section 170.12 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education. To the extent practicable, implementation of the CAP must begin by the end of the

fiscal year. For more information on preparing and filing your CAP, please refer to our brochure, *Responding to an OSC Audit Report*, which you received with the draft audit report. The CAP should be posted on the District's website for public review.

Appendix C: Resources and Services

Regional Office Directory

www.osc.state.ny.us/files/local-government/pdf/regional-directory.pdf

Cost-Saving Ideas – Resources, advice and assistance on cost-saving ideas

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/publications

Fiscal Stress Monitoring – Resources for local government officials experiencing fiscal problems

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/fiscal-monitoring

Local Government Management Guides – Series of publications that include technical information and suggested practices for local government management

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/publications

Planning and Budgeting Guides – Resources for developing multiyear financial, capital, strategic and other plans

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/resources/planning-resources

Protecting Sensitive Data and Other Local Government Assets – A non-technical cybersecurity guide for local government leaders

www.osc.state.ny.us/files/local-government/publications/pdf/cyber-security-guide.pdf

Required Reporting – Information and resources for reports and forms that are filed with the Office of the State Comptroller

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/required-reporting

Research Reports/Publications – Reports on major policy issues facing local governments and State policy-makers

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/publications

Training – Resources for local government officials on in-person and online training opportunities on a wide range of topics

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/academy

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