

Port Washington 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

Port Washington Union Free School District

Audit Objective

Determine whether the Port Washington 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 as required to all staff for the 2020-21 school year by September 15, 2020 per New York State Education Department (SED) regulations.

- Only teaching staff and teaching assistants at the middle school were offered the middle school mental health training.
- Six of the 12 recommended components of mental health that educators should know were not included in the District's middle school training.

The District officials did not maintain documentation to support attendance for training and we were unable to determine which staff members participated.

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 Nassau County and is governed by an elected seven-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.

Quick Facts

2020-2021 School Year

Staff	1,152
Students	5,363
School District Buildings	7

Audit Period

July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021

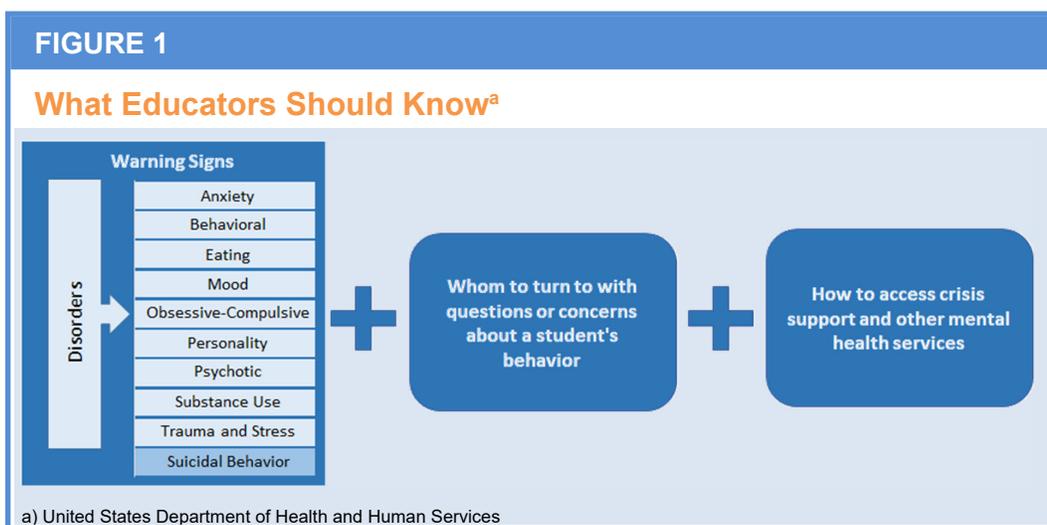
Mental Health Training

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 All Recommended Mental Health Components

The Superintendent delegated the completion of the SED certification to the High School Assistant Principal (Assistant Principal). The Assistant Principal certified to SED that all staff received training on the emergency response plan on September 4, 2020, which must also include training on a component of mental health.

Our review of the mental health training material provided to us found the District did not provide mental health training to all staff as a requirement of the annual emergency response plan training.

The Assistant Superintendent for Pupil and Personnel Services (Assistant Superintendent) told us that mental health training was provided at each of the District’s seven schools individually, and each building principal was responsible for ensuring the training was completed. Each school building was contacted for training records. The Middle School Principal provided her building’s mental health presentation. We reviewed and found that the presentation included six of the 12 recommended mental health components. Missing from the training were the warning signs for eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, psychotic disorders, substance use disorders, suicidal behavior, and how to access support and services (Figure 2).

The Middle School Principal told us the training only focused on anxiety and other related disorders because she felt they were important to review because of the Covid-19 pandemic, and other mental health trainings were offered throughout the

Figure 2: District’s Mental Health Training

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

year on professional development days. The Assistant Superintendent told us no other school building retained its mental health training material because it was written over with the next school year's training content.

The District Did Not Provide Training to All Staff

The Assistant Superintendent told us that mental health training was offered virtually to school staff whose positions had direct contact with students, such as school administrators, teachers or teaching assistants, during the Superintendent's Conference Day held on September 4, and training was not offered to any staff at administration buildings. The Middle School Principal told us that although the middle school held the training for teachers and teaching assistants, documentation to support attendance for these trainings was not maintained. Therefore, we were unable to determine that any staff members participated in the mental health training offered.

The Superintendent told us he relied on the building principals to ensure that the required mental health training was offered, and that staff attended the training. Further, he explained the District's focus was on the impact of COVID-19 and safely reopening schools to in-person learning during the pandemic.

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



PORT WASHINGTON
Union Free School District

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ELAINE FENICK 516-767-5050
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DAVID MEOLI, Ed.D. 516-767-5040
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February 14, 2022

Julie Landcastle, Chief Examiner
Statewide Audit
State Office Building, Suite 1702
44 Hawley Street
Binghamton, New York 13901-4417

Dear Ms. Landcastle:

Please find the Port Washington School District response to the OSC Audit Report: APPENDIX A- Response from District Officials.

The Port Washington School District appreciates the New York State Comptroller's Office and Chief Examiners' *Key Findings and Recommendation* regarding the audit of our mental health training for the 2020-2021 school year.

As noted, school districts across New York State were contending with incredibly uncertain circumstances related to COVID-19, especially when all staff were finally returning to school in September 2021 on a full-time basis after working in a hybrid or fully remote capacity for the previous five months. With that said, the district has created an action plan that ensures all staff receives mental health training.

In closing, we appreciate the collaboration of our two offices working together to make sure all staff members receive what they need and deserve.

Sincerely,

Michael J. Hynes, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

/da

cc: Kathleen O'Hara; Emily Beys; [REDACTED]

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 interviewed District officials to gain an understanding of the District's computer systems used for creating, disseminating and monitoring mental health training provided to staff.
- We reviewed relevant State laws and regulations, and guidance from SED and the DHHS. 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 was attended by all staff.
- We reviewed and tested the mental health training materials provided by the District to determine if training on mental health followed guidance. We documented when training materials were not retained by the District.
- 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

Contact

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