

# Seaford Union Free School District

## Mental Health Training Component of the New York SAVE Act

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**JUNE 2022**

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

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# Report Highlights

## Seaford Union Free School District

### Audit Objective

Determine whether the Seaford 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.

- Nine of the 12 recommended components of mental health that educators should know were not included in the District's training offered to staff.
- Eight of the 12 recommended components of mental health that educators should know were not included in the District's training offered to the special education aides.

District officials did not maintain documentation to support attendance for training and we were unable to determine which staff member 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 generally 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 five-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	628
Students	2,185
School Buildings	4

### Audit Period

July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021

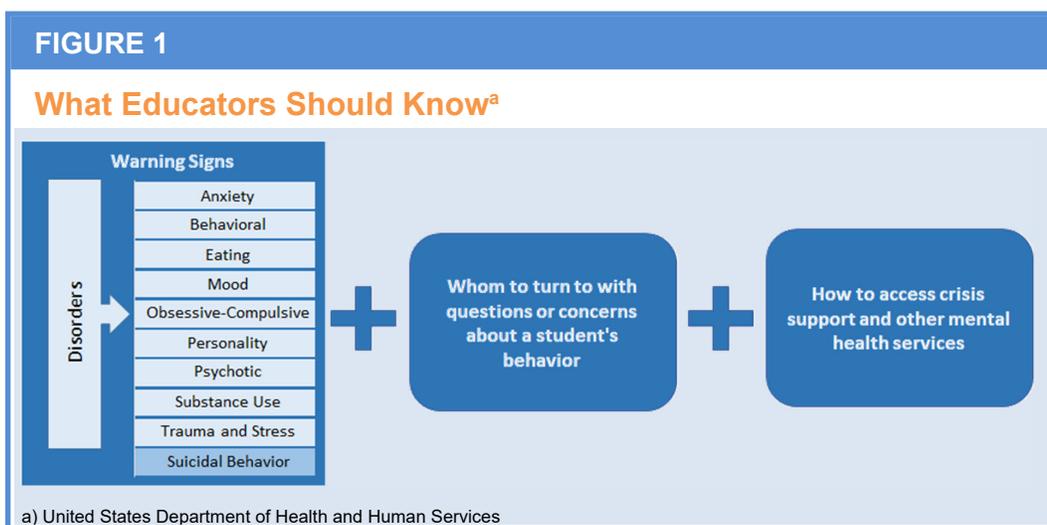
# Mental Health Training

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.<sup>1</sup> 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 Assistant Superintendent for Business (Assistant Superintendent).

The Assistant Superintendent certified to SED that all staff received training on the emergency response plan on September 3, 2020, which must also include training on a component of mental health. The Assistant Superintendent told us the District had two trainings which included mental health content.

We reviewed the materials presented for these trainings and found the “Supporting School Professionals During Uncertain Times; Managing Stress & Anxiety” (Stress & Anxiety) training offered three of the recommended mental health components and the “Supporting the Special Education Classroom During the COVID-19 Pandemic” (Special Education) training offered four of the recommended mental health components (Figure 2).

The Stress & Anxiety training was missing the warning sign for trauma and stress related disorders as well as information on whom to turn to; the Special Education training was missing information on how to access support and services. Missing from both trainings were the warning signs for eating disorders, mood disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, personality disorders, psychotic disorder, substance use disorders and suicidal behavior (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: District’s Mental Health Trainings**

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

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The Stress & Anxiety training was offered by the District through an outside vendor on September 2, 2020 for all staff. The Director of Pupil Personnel Services (Director) told us the District could not add any information to the Stress & Anxiety training because the outside vendor was going to present the training to other districts and did not want to change the training to include additional information.

The Special Education training was conducted by the Director on September 3, 2020 and was for the District's teachers' aides, who support Special Education Classroom services. The Director told us that the Special Education training offered to the teachers' aides focused primarily on COVID protocols and contained warning signs related to the pandemic. Further, only the aides were offered this training because it included information specific to their duties.

The Director told us these trainings were offered virtually during the Superintendent's Conference days held on September 2 and 3. However, documentation to support attendance for these trainings was not maintained. Therefore, which staff members participated in the virtual trainings could not be determined.

The Assistant Superintendent also told us additional mental health trainings, with information on mental health warning signs, were included in the certification and were provided to District staff. However, these trainings were not distributed to staff prior to September 15.

The Superintendent told us that in August and September 2020, the District was concentrated on providing in-person learning to better support their students' overall well-being. Because of that, she told us, the primary focus for the trainings conducted on the Superintendents' Conference days was on meeting the changing COVID-19 requirements to safely return students to the classroom. She told us the District recognized the importance of mental health and held trainings on mental health after September 15.

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

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**Dr. Adele V. Pecora • Superintendent of Schools**

1600 Washington Avenue, Seaford, NY 11783 • Phone: (516) 592-4010 • Fax: (516) 592-4049

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

February 11, 2022

Dear Ms. Landcastle:

Please accept this letter as acknowledgement of the receipt of the Preliminary Draft Findings Report of the Mental Health Training Audit for the Seaford Union Free School District as well as the District's official response to the audit. The report contains information relating to the audit conducted by the Office of the State Comptroller which covered the 2020-2021 fiscal year.

On behalf of the Board of Education and Administration we would like to thank the audit team for their professionalism and thorough review of the mental health trainings in our District during the 2020-2021 school year. The District is grateful for the opportunity to receive feedback and look forward to utilizing this information to improve upon our ongoing efforts and practices in this area.

To that end, we acknowledge the findings and recommendations set forth in the report. We acknowledge the portion of the finding that states, "Provide mental health training to all staff and ensure it is completed by September 15<sup>th</sup>, as required."

The Seaford School District takes very seriously supporting students and staff in the area of mental health and wellness, with mental health initiatives at the forefront of all District educational practices. In actuality, all required components of mental health trainings with the exception of eating disorders were completed either by trainings conducted by the Special Education Department, Northwell, or Global Compliance Network (GCN) trainings. However, because of the complexities associated with the return to in-person learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, not all trainings were completed by September 15, 2020. We do not believe that Figure 2: District's Mental Health Trainings, accurately depicts the substantial training provided by the Seaford School District during the 2020-2021 school year. The District is extremely proud of the substantial mental health trainings that are provided in our district:

**Mental Health Training:** The District conducted two (2) mental health trainings for staff prior to the September 15<sup>th</sup> deadline outlined by the SAVE Act and the NYS guidance and regulations. In each of these trainings, current research in mental health was reviewed, including warning signs that can be identified as a result of several mental health diagnoses. The presentations included discussion on accessing appropriate services through our Northwell Mental Health Strategic

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Partnership with South Oaks and informed staff about whom they should contact in the District for additional information or to access resources.

It is important to note that the District identified mental health as a primary focus prior to the 2020-2021 school year as evidenced by our investment in our partnership with Northwell's Mental Health Strategic Partnership with South Oaks, one of Long Island's leaders in mental health care and services. They have been an integral part to our success in connecting students and families to care, providing consultation to teams and families, delivering staff training, and offering acute care to individuals needing support. In addition, a significant portion of our reopening plan focused on mental health support services.

Subsequent to the September 15<sup>th</sup> deadline, additional trainings were conducted for all District staff. Trainings through the GCN included Suicide Prevention and Dignity for All Students Act (DASA). Other trainings included monthly "Mental Health" department meetings and faculty meetings to review mental health resources, referral processes and protocols.

**Mental Health Training Components:** Included in this Draft Report on page four within the chart, it indicates that "while the SAVE Act and SED requirements state that annual school safety training must include a component on mental health, neither the SAVE Act nor the SED requirements directly address what topics should be included in the mental health training component." The foundation for the mental health training components used in assessing the two (2) mental health trainings conducted in District for all staff prior to the mandated September 15<sup>th</sup> deadline was the NYSED August 10, 2016 Guidance Memo, *Mental Health Resources for Educators* which includes resources from the US Department of Health and Human Services website entitled, *What Educators Should Know*. The Seaford UFSD strongly agrees that clear and explicit descriptions of the required training are not provided. It is important to note that this document had not been updated since 2016 and many of the links are no longer active. Moreover, there is no evidence that the NYS Education Department has shared this document with our school district in the last six years. In addition, there has been significant Central Office turnover across the area, and Seaford is no exception. It is our recommendation that the NYS Education Department annually issue a reminder of this requirement which includes updated, active hyperlinks and the chart in the Figure 2 is clearly displayed in the body of the main document. Additionally, a "pop-up" informational paragraph should be incorporated within the assurance box within the NYSED portal when submitting the District-Wide Health and Safety Plans for September 15<sup>th</sup> that again delineates the required trainings.

The two (2) mental health trainings the District provided to staff prior to the September 15<sup>th</sup> deadline included specific and general warning signs aligned with a number of mental health disorders based on current mental health partners and organizations such as South Oaks, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the Suicide Prevention Center of New York State (SPCNY).

In looking at the SED Guidance document, we interpret the spirit of the document to provide educators with resources to choose from when developing and delivering mental health training, rather than detailing specific components of mandated mental health staff training, which was the focus of this audit.

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As the Seaford School District continues its work in educating the whole child, the mental health and well-being of our students and staff remains our utmost priority. We will continue to address this area with great pride and look forward to incorporating the findings of this Draft Report in our future endeavors. We appreciate the time and effort undertaken by the Audit Team on behalf of the NYS Office of the State Comptroller's Office and we look forward to implementing the recommendations outlined in the Preliminary Draft Findings Report.

Very truly yours,

Adele V. Pecora, Ed.D.  
Superintendent of Schools

AVP:ts  
cc: Stacie Stark  
John Striffolino  
Rhonda Meserole  
Mary Catherine Culella-Sun

## Appendix B: Audit Methodology and Standards

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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 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 documented when training materials, including attendance records, 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

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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

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### **Regional Office Directory**

[www.osc.state.ny.us/files/local-government/pdf/regional-directory.pdf](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/academy)

## Contact

Office of the New York State Comptroller  
Division of Local Government and School Accountability  
110 State Street, 12th Floor, Albany, New York 12236

Tel: (518) 474-4037 • Fax: (518) 486-6479 • Email: [localgov@osc.ny.gov](mailto:localgov@osc.ny.gov)

[www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government](http://www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government)

Local Government and School Accountability Help Line: (866) 321-8503

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**STATEWIDE AUDIT** – Julie Landcastle, Chief Examiner

Utica State Office Building, Room 604 • 207 Genesee Street • Utica, New York 13501

Tel (315) 793-2484



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