

Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Central School District

Mental Health Training Component of the New York SAVE Act

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

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Report Highlights

Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Central School District

Audit Objective

Determine whether the Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Central 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.

- Thirty of the 81 employees' records we tested showed training was not completed by September 15, 2020, as required by New York State Education Department (SED) regulations.
- All 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 Saratoga and Schenectady Counties 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 School Resource Officer was designated as the Chief Emergency Officer and was responsible for coordinating emergency plan training for staff. However, he told us he was not involved with this training. The District's Professional Development Coordinator told us she had assumed these training responsibilities.

Quick Facts

2020-2021 School Year

Staff	800
Students	3,080
Staff Training Records Tested	81
School Buildings	5

Audit Period

July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021

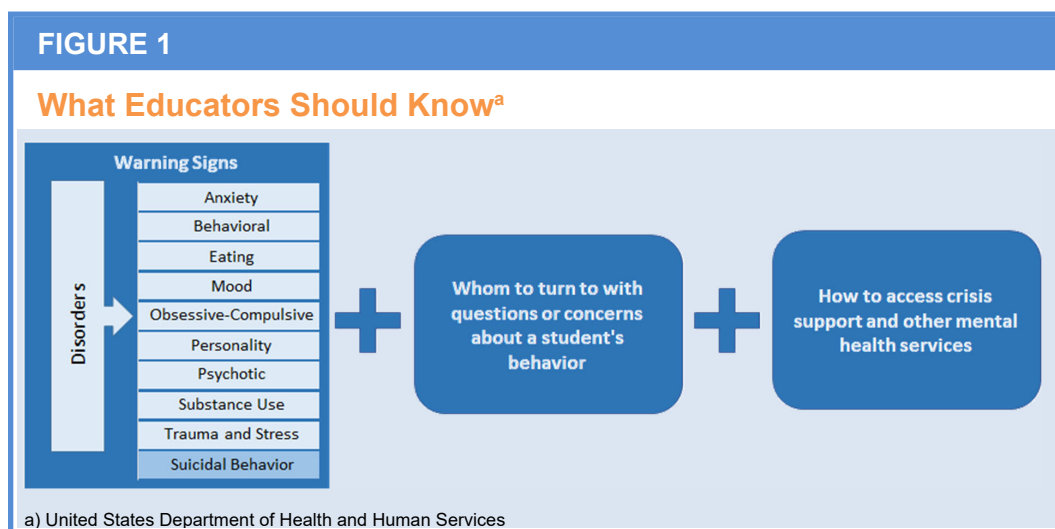
Mental Health Training

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 Included All Recommended Mental Health Components

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

We reviewed the District’s “Mental Health” training module and found all recommended mental health components were included within the training (Figure 2).

The District Did Not Provide Training to All Staff by September 15

The District’s Professional Development Coordinator emailed all staff, excluding substitutes and coaches, instructions to complete the mental health training by the end of September 2020. Time for staff to complete training was provided on September 9, 10 and 11, 2020 during professional development days. She told us substitutes and coaches were not included because she was unaware they needed to complete the training.

We tested District records for 81 of the 804 staff to determine if the mental health training was completed by September 15, 2020, as required. Records showed 51 of the 81 employees’ mental health training was completed by September 15. However, the other 30 employees’ records, which included the positions of Superintendent, Principal, Assistant Principal, Guidance Counselor, Teacher, Teacher Assistant, Bus driver, Clerical worker, Coach, Computer Technician, Cook, Custodian, Librarian, and Occupational Therapist, showed the mental health training was not completed by September 15. The Professional Development Coordinator told us that it was challenging to monitor completion of this training, along with the District’s other eight mandatory training courses for its staff.

Figure 2: District’s Mental Health Training Module

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

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.

Appendix A: Response From District Officials



Burnt Hills - Ballston Lake Central School District

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February 14, 2022

We would like to offer a brief response to the findings of the audit of our mandatory Mental Health Training for School Year 2020-21. We are happy to see that the audit confirms that Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Central School District provided training materials that met or exceeded the State's requirements for all of the faculty and staff members in the district. While the materials for this training were specifically communicated and made available to district faculty and staff members in late August of 2020, the district acknowledges that a percentage of our faculty and staff members did not complete the training by the September 15 deadline. We believe a few specific reasons contributed to this situation which are identified below. In addition, we would like to take this opportunity to highlight the corrective actions that have been put in place both before and after this review of procedures occurred by the Office of the State Comptroller.

- The opening of school in September of 2020 was particularly challenging due to COVID-19 pandemic-related logistical and operational changes that had to be made in a very short period of time. As such, the district gave all faculty and staff members a deadline of September 30, 2020, to complete this and other mandatory training as opposed to the September 15, 2020 deadline outlined in the comptroller's audit.
- While 51 faculty/staff members out of the 81 that were sampled by the comptroller's office completed this training by September 15, 2020, we believe it is important to note that an additional 10 faculty/staff members completed the required training by September 30, 2020, as indicated in the district's direction to them. In total, 75% of the faculty/staff members sampled in this audit completed these required trainings by September 30, 2020.
- Of the remaining 20 faculty/staff members that still had not completed the training by September 30, 2022, 7 were substitute or temporary employees while 13 were permanent staff members of Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Central School District.
- In the Fall of 2021, before the district was scheduled to have a comptroller's audit in this area, Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Central School District was initiating a new process to monitor employee participation and completion of annual mental health and other required trainings. We believe this new system will help ensure participation by all required district faculty and staff members by the mandated deadlines in the future.



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- This new system links all of the training spreadsheets that show who has completed each specific training and merges it with a current list of all faculty/staff members generated by the Human Resources Department. Using a mail-merge add-on, a message is able to be sent every two weeks to remind faculty/staff members to complete their trainings, or to congratulate them for completing their trainings.
- Moving forward, the district has committed to providing additional, dedicated, compensated time for all temporary, seasonal, and hourly employees to participate in these trainings. We believe that specifically dedicating hours for these faculty/staff members toward completing these required trainings will significantly increase their participation. This, coupled with the new system of administrative oversight described above, should help to move the district forward toward full compliance with this State mandate.

Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Central School District remains committed to the mental health needs of our students and staff, and is thankful to the Office of the State Comptroller for reviewing this particular aspect of the programs and services we have in place to support our students and faculty/staff members. We appreciate the professionalism of the staff from the comptroller's office during the course of this audit, as well as their cooperation with district staff members involved with obtaining this data for their review.

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 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 determined the total number of individuals employed by the District during our audit period by obtaining and reviewing an employee listing.
- Using the District's employee listing we grouped all employees by job type, specific (Superintendent, Principal, Assistant Principal and Counselors), teachers and other staff. We used a bias selection method and random number generator to select a sample of 81 employees (10 percent), consisting of 17 specific, 32 teachers and 32 staff, to determine whether employees completed required trainings according to job titles. Employees hired after September 15, 2020 were not included in the sample.

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.

Unless otherwise indicated in this letter, samples for testing were selected based on professional judgment, as it was not the intent to project the results onto the entire population. Where applicable, information is presented concerning the value and/or the relevant population size and the sample selected for examination.

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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