

Unadilla Valley Central 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

Unadilla Valley Central School District

Audit Objective

Determine whether the Unadilla Valley 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 any staff for the 2020-21 school year by September 15, 2020.

- 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 Chenango, Madison and Otsego 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 Safety Coordinator is designated as the Chief Emergency Officer and is responsible for coordinating emergency plan training for staff.

Quick Facts

2020-2021 School Year

Staff	242
Students	795
School Buildings	1

Audit Period

July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021

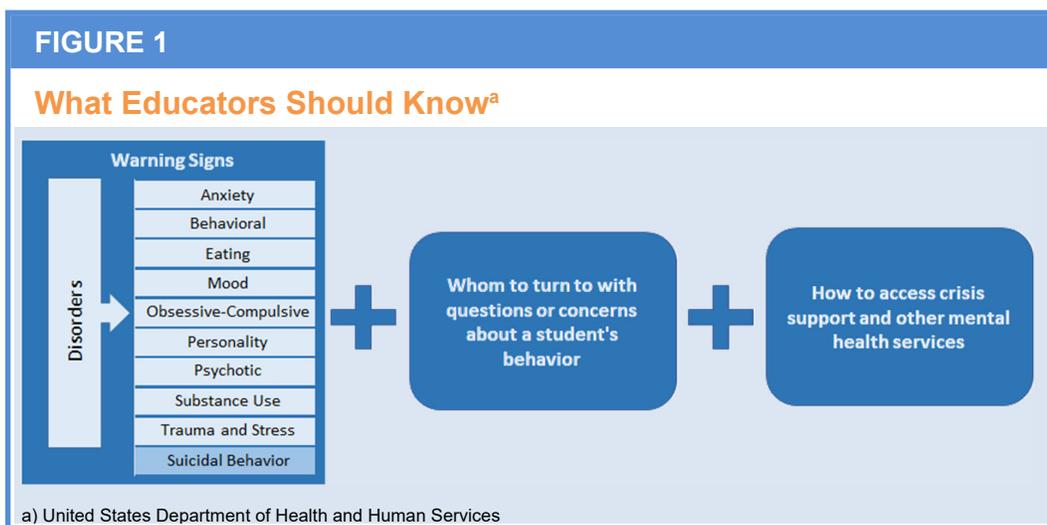
Mental Health Training

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 New York State Education Department (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 previous Superintendent certified to SED that by September 15, all staff received the training on the emergency response plan, which must also include training on a component of mental health.

The Chief Emergency Officer told us a training that included mental health content was provided in the District’s “Required Dignity for All Students Act Refresher” training.

We reviewed the District’s presentation and none of the 12 recommended mental health components were included (Figure 2). The training included content on raising awareness and sensitivity to potential acts of discrimination and harassment, not the recommended mental health warning signs, “whom to turn to” and “how to access crisis support.”

Figure 2: District’s “Required Dignity for All Students Act Refresher” 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

The Chief Emergency Officer told us he was not aware of the required mental health training for the 12 recommended components. As a result, the District did not provide training with the recommended components of mental health to staff.

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

UNADILLA VALLEY CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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February 8, 2022

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caps@osc.ny.gov – Sent Via Regular Mail and Email

New York State Education Department
Office of Audit Services, Room 524 EB
89 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12234
oas@mail.nysed.gov – Sent Via Regular Mail and Email

RE: Unadilla Valley Central School District Response to the Mental Health Training Audit Draft Report of Examination from Office of the State Comptroller for Period Covering 2020-2021 School Year

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Unadilla Valley Central School District is in receipt of the Mental Health Training Audit Draft Report of Examination for the period of July 1, 2020-June 30, 2021. Please accept this letter as the district's formal response to the audit.

On behalf of the Board of Education and administration, we would first like to thank the local staff of the Comptroller's Office for their professionalism while conducting the audit. The staff was courteous and helpful throughout the audit process.

The district agrees with the audit findings of the Draft Report. One change was requested by the district during the exit conference meeting on January 21, 2022. Regarding page 5 of the draft, it was stated that Kevin Nial "*was aware of the required mental health training and was unaware of the 12 recommended components.*" In fact, Kevin Nial, Safety Coordinator, corrected this stating that, "*He was not aware of the required mental health training and was unaware of the 12 recommended components.*" [REDACTED] Examiner Municipal Affairs, noted the request and returned a call to Superintendent Taylor on January 21, 2022, to confirm that the Comptroller's office would amend the sentence in the report, as noted.

THE MISSION OF THE UNADILLA VALLEY CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT IS TO PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH A QUALITY EDUCATION OF HIGH ACADEMIC STANDARDS WHILE FOSTERING CREATIVITY, DIVERSITY, AND CRITICAL THINKING IN A SAFE AND NURTURING ENVIRONMENT.

The district acknowledges that we did not provide the 12 recommended mental health components as required under the New York Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act (SAVE Act) during the 2021-2021 school year by September 15, 2020.

As shared during the audit process, during COVID, the district ran on a hybrid and sometimes remote schedule during the 2020-2021 school year. The district's priority was to maintain the safety and health of all students and staff during this time.

As per the recommendation of your office, the Unadilla Valley Central School District will provide mental health training to all staff and ensure it is completed by September 15, as required. The training will include all (12) recommended components that address recognition of the warning signs, whom to turn to for assistance, and how to access appropriate services.

The district will address the implementation timeline for the mental health training that will include all (12) recommended components in its Corrective Action Plan (CAP). Upon receipt of the final audit report, the district will submit the Corrective Action Plan within 90 days, as required.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions and/or concerns regarding our response.

Sincerely,

A rectangular white box redacting the signature of Brenton S. Taylor.

Brenton S. Taylor, Superintendent of Schools

BT/vld

Cc: Unadilla Valley CSD Board of Education
Kevin Nial, Safety Coordinator

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 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 provided to staff.
- 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.

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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