

# School emergency plans found lacking

**Audit: Local police not kept abreast of latest updates**

BY MICHAEL GORMLEY  
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ALBANY — A state audit finds that the state Education Department and some school districts failed to file and update emergency plans and sometimes failed to adequately communicate the plans with local police, as required under a law designed to make schools safer from mass shootings.

State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli said Tuesday the audit found many schools visited by his team couldn't show that they had adopted annual safety plans or shared them with local law enforcement, likely to be the first responders to a shooting.

"We don't want to nickel-and-

dime the safety of our children," DiNapoli said.

The state Education Department said it is improving its practices, according to a letter to auditors. It also said certain criticisms go beyond its obligation under the law "and would require additional resources for the department to provide oversight over schools in this regard."

"There is literally nothing more important than protecting our children," said Education Department spokeswoman Emily DeSantis on Tuesday. "Our schools must always be safe havens — places where students and their teachers are free to learn and to teach. We are pleased to report 99 percent of schools filed their emergency response plans with the state police. We will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to improve processes."

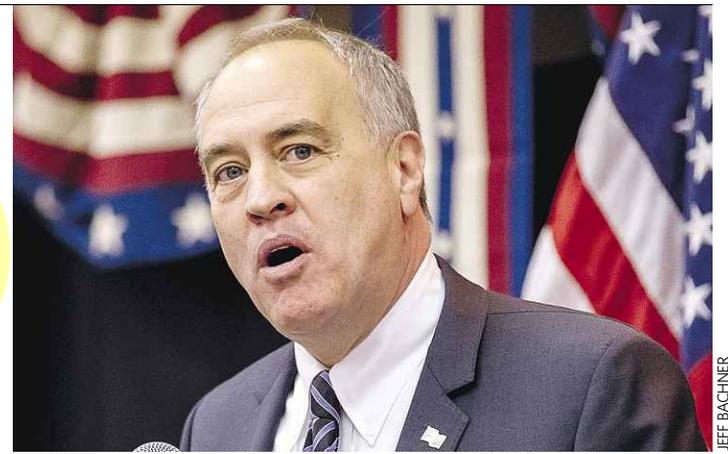
The audit tested the Education Department and a sampling of schools, none of which

were identified, against their responsibilities under the Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act, known as the SAVE Act, of 2000. The state law was created to prevent school violence and make schools safer for students and adults. Among the findings:

- The state Education Department didn't provide "critical oversight" to make sure schools had updated safety plans.

- The department had assigned just one part-time staffer to oversee school safety planning requirements. Another part-timer was added after the audit, which was conducted from September 2016 to September 2018.

- The department succeeded in submitted school building plans to state police each year, but auditors noted that local police are usually the first to arrive at shootings and other emergencies. Auditors said the state doesn't have any reliable assurance that local law enforcement had gotten copies of build-



Thomas DiNapoli's audit tested an unnamed sampling of districts.

ing plans. Auditors said department officials said local enforcement is advised of school plans through a computer portal. But the auditors said access to the portal wasn't always reliable.

- Of 14 public school districts examined, 12 didn't have evidence of a 30-day comment period for their district plan, 10 didn't complete annual staff training, and nine didn't include at least one of the required representatives on their safety team. Among the nine safety teams that lacked some required representatives, two failed to include school safety personnel, six didn't include a school board representative, and five didn't have parent or teacher representatives.

- Of 779 URLs emailed to the

Education Department that were supposed to link to emergency plans, 555 URLs didn't link to a plan. Of the 555 URLs, 406 linked to general sites, 129 were no longer operational, and 20 were otherwise broken.

- The Education Department never issued a report on compliance with the SAVE Act to the governor and Legislature as required so they could consider improvements or corrections. The department now agrees to do so.

The state Education Department recently received a five-year School Emergency Management Grant from the U.S. Department of Education that will be used in part to hire a full-time person to improve emergency response planning, DiNapoli said.

# Snapshot of consumer confidence

BY JAMES T. MADORE  
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Consumer confidence in the metropolitan area rose last month compared with a year earlier, according to a survey released Tuesday.

The Siena College Research Institute reported its Index of Consumer Sentiment was at 96.3 points in March for Long Island, New York City and its northern suburbs. A year earlier, the index stood at 89.3.

Consumer sentiment readings above 76 points indicate that the number of residents who are optimistic about their immediate financial future is larger than the number who are pessimistic.

The index hit a 10-year high of 97.6 points in December.

The readings display "continuing strength among consumers," said Siena pollster Douglas Lonnstrom.

In the metro area 41 percent of residents surveyed said

gasoline prices were either a very or somewhat serious problem last month, down from 42 percent in December. A year ago, 25 percent of residents were worried about prices at the pump.

In terms of food prices, 58 percent said they were either a very serious or somewhat serious problem last month, up from 42 percent in December. A year ago, 57 percent of residents expressed concern.

Still, Lonnstrom said worry about the cost of gasoline and food "should not slow the economy."

Retailers and economists closely follow confidence indexes because consumer spending accounts for about 70 percent of economic activity.

Siena, based in Loudonville, near Albany, polled 804 adults in New York State between March 7 and 20. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.6 percentage points.



Shoppers visit Neiman Marcus, anchor tenant at Hudson Yards.

# FACEBOOK TWEAKS ITS TOOLS FOR HONORING DEAD

WASHINGTON — Facebook says it will use artificial intelligence to help find profiles of people who have died, so their friends and family members won't get, for instance, painful reminders about their birthday.

The social network said Tuesday that it is also adding a "tributes" section to accounts that have been memorialized, that is, designated as belonging to someone who has died. Friends and family members will be able to write posts and share photos in this section to remember their loved one.

Facebook is also tightening its rules around who can memorialize an account. Until now, anyone could do this by sending the company proof that someone had died, such an obituary. Now, it will have to be a friend or family member.