

## Law helps disabled students at graduation

### Graduation

All, if credentialed, can attend with classmates

**Natasha Vaughn** Albany Bureau USA TODAY NETWORK

ALBANY – New York students with disabilities will now be better able to take part in high school graduation ceremonies.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed Zachary’s Law on Wednesday. The new law mandates that school districts will have to create policies that allow students with disabilities to participate in graduation ceremonies if they have earned commencement credentials.

“Just because students with disabilities may not take a traditional path to completing their high school education, it doesn’t mean they should be deprived of celebrating a special day with friends and family,” the bill’s sponsor, Assemblyman James Skoufis, D-Woodbury, Orange County, said in a statement.

The law was named after Zachary Lerman of the Washingtonville school district in Orange County who was able to participate in his school’s graduation ceremony last year at the same time as his friends and peers.

According to state law, students can remain in high school up until they turn age 21. Some students with learning disabilities may take longer than the standard four years to complete the graduation requirements.

Prior to the new law, many New York high schools would not allow students to walk across a graduation stage unless they had earned a diploma.

That meant that students with disabilities who would be leaving high school a number of years after their friends would be going to graduation

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with a different group of people.

So lawmakers said schools should accommodate students so they can participate in graduation ceremonies with the students they grew up with.

The new law, for example, requires that school districts must inform students, parents and guardians yearly about its policy for students with disabilities participating in the graduation ceremony. If a student with a disability has been issued a commencement credential, they will now be allowed to cross the stage at graduation.

A commencement credential is a certificate that is acknowledgment by the state Board of Regents that a student now has the skills necessary for entry-level employment.

The law goes into effect Dec. 18.

“Due to the cooperation and teamwork of everyone involved, this law will have a profound impact on individuals throughout the state of New York,” the bill’s Senate sponsor, Bill Larkin, R-Cornwall-on-Hudson, Orange County, said in a statement.

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