Children in NY schools will soon be taught about sexual abuse

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ALBANY – New York public schools will soon begin educating children on ways to prevent child sexual abuse.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo last week signed “Erin’s Law,” which will require the state Education Department to develop curriculum about child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation for children in grades K-8.

The department will also provide technical assistance to schools on the curriculum to ensure students learn about sexual abuse in an age-appropriate manner, according to the law.

The new law will take effect ahead of the 2020-21 school year.

“Sexual abuse is a nationwide epidemic that has inflicted unimaginable pain on countless children, and we must use every lever at our disposal to stop it,” Cuomo said in a statement.

New York becomes the 37th state to adopt such a measure after the bill stalled in the state Legislature for more than a decade.

The law is named after Erin Merryn, a child sexual abuse survivor who has traveled the country trying to get the legislation passed in as many states as possible.

State Sen. Alessandra Biaggi, D-Pelham, Westchester County, called the new law a “monumental win that is long overdue.”

Biaggi, who shared her own story of child sexual abuse as lawmakers debated the Child Victims Act earlier this year, sponsored the legislation.

“As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, it has been an honor to carry this bill and fight like hell to give future generations the tools I didn’t have to protect themselves against harm and lasting trauma,” she said in a statement.

Advocates wanted bill signed earlier

Some advocacy groups, however, blasted the governor for not signing the bill earlier and criticized his decision not to invite survivors of child sexual abuse to a bill-signing ceremony.

“This should have been an event for survivors, advocates, and coalitions who are and have been working to educate and empower New York’s kids against the heinous crime of childhood sexual assault,” Gary Greenberg, a child sexual abuse survivor and founder of the Fighting for Children PAC, said in a statement.

The law, which cleared the Legislature on June 20, will take effect on July 1, 2020.

But had it been signed before July of this year, the law would already be in effect.

“We now have to wait a whole year to offer these protections and empowerments for our kids,” Greenberg said.

It’s not uncommon for laws to take effect months after being signed in order to give agencies and other affected parties time to conform to the new standards.
Similar measures

Erin’s Law is the latest measure aimed at empowering victims of child sexual abuse.

Lawmakers earlier this year approved the Child Victims Act.

The law, signed by the governor back in February, extends the statute of limitations for victims of child sexual abuse to file criminal charges against their alleged abusers to 28 and allows victims to bring civil charges against their abusers up to the age of 55.

The law also created a one-year look-back window for victims to bring civil charges against their abusers to bring criminal charges regardless of age. Hundreds of lawsuits were filed when the window first opened earlier this month.

And lawmakers passed a series of bills overhauling the state’s sexual harassment laws, including ending the “severe or pervasive” standard that advocates say allowed harassment in the workplace to flourish.

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State Sen. Alessandra Biaggi, D-Pelham, discusses her personal experience with sexual abuse during a vote on the Child Victims Act on Jan. 28. JON CAMPBELL/ALBANY BUREAU FILE PHOTO