

# Governor Christie Signs Legislation Ensuring Equal Opportunities In Team Sports For Students With Disabilities

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Trenton, NJ – Governor Chris Christie today signed into law bipartisan legislation that ensures students with disabilities are not prevented from participating in athletics and are provided with reasonable accommodation or modification based on individual needs of the student. This legislation builds on federal law guidance that was issued by the U.S. Department of Education in January 2013. New Jersey will comply with the federal law as well as promote greater inclusion of student athletes with disabilities.

School districts are now required to ensure that a student with a disability has an equal opportunity to participate in physical activity programs, existing classroom activities that involve physical activity and athletic programs in an integrated manner to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the student. The legislation also allows for the provision of reasonable modifications or aids or services necessary to provide a student with a disability an equal opportunity to participate in any of the aforementioned physical activities.

“As the Special Olympics are being celebrated in New Jersey this week, we are reminded of the difference that team sports can make in the lives of children with disabilities by promoting acceptance and inclusion,” said Governor Chris Christie. “Involvement in sports instills strong work ethic and an understanding of the importance of teamwork in our students as they participate in their sport of choice. This legislation will afford all New Jersey students, regardless of their disability, the opportunity to grow as athletes and members of a community.”

“The Special Olympics are showing us that those with different abilities can lead just as complete and fulfilling lives as anyone,” said Senate President Steve Sweeney, who entered public service after his daughter was born with Down syndrome. “Every child deserves an equal opportunity to participate in team sports. It can go a long way towards building character, learning the importance of working together and, perhaps most importantly, creating friendships.”

The bill provides for certain exceptions to the inclusion of a student with a disability in physical education programs but notes that in the event of these exceptions, the school district must make a reasonable effort to provide the student with an alternative opportunity in a existing adapted or unified sports program, such as the Special Olympics New Jersey. A school district may develop these programs on a school, district, regional, or county basis.

Under the provisions of the bill, the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association, in consultation with Special Olympics New Jersey and other adapted sports organizations, may establish interscholastic athletic programs for students participating in unified sports programs developed by the school districts. Additionally, the association may require a coach of a unified sports program of athletics to receive training specific to that program.

Sponsors of S-2079 include Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Salem/Gloucester), Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto (D-Bergen/Hudson) and Assembly Members Pamela Lampitt (D-Camden/Burlington), Valerie Vainieri Huttlet (D-Bergen), Daniel Benson (D-Mercer/Middlesex), Carmelo Garcia (D-Hudson) and Shavonda Sumter (D-Bergen/Passaic).

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