



Southern student to attend graduation

Teen, who has cerebral palsy, not done with school

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One day after Southern Regional High School student Mitch Sieling testified before state senators that he was banned from attending his school's graduation next month, school officials had a change of heart.

Sieling, 18, of Waretown (Ocean Township), who has cerebral palsy, was called out of gym class into a meeting with the school principal Tuesday, and was told he could walk at the graduation ceremony on June 19.

"When they called me into the office, I was scared at first," Sieling said. "I am shocked and excited. To be honest, I didn't think they would budge."

Sieling testified Monday in support of Alicia's Law, which would require school districts to allow students with disabilities to attend graduation ceremonies after their fourth year of high school, even if they are not receiving a diploma.

The legislation was inspired by Hanover Park High School student Alicia Vitiello, whose East Hanover family successfully fought for her right to attend graduation this June.

Sieling, like Alicia, plans to continue receiving educational services until the age of 21, as permitted by federal law. Technically, he has met the school's graduation requirements but wants to receive additional classroom training for entry into the work world.

The district's graduation policy requires that students complete their education before they can attend graduation. Sieling had asked everyone from his case manager to the superintendent if he could attend, and they each rejected his request.

"If you look past his braces and his disability, you'll see he's a totally normal 18-year-old," said his mother, Michele Sieling. "He deserves to be recognized for his achievement."

With the assistance of the Family Support Center of New Jersey, Sieling was scheduled to have his case heard today before a state administrative law judge.

First, he testified before the Senate Education Committee, telling senators that he felt lonely because all his friends were attending the ceremony.

Sieling has attended school the past seven years with the Class of 2007 and considers himself one of them. His name is on a Class of 2007 mural in the high school and in the yearbook, and he's attending the senior prom.

Sieling was told Tuesday that Superintendent James Kerfoot was so impressed after listening to his Senate testimony that he brought Sieling's case to school board members at a committee meeting Monday night. The board members agreed to make an exception in his case, Sieling said.

Kerfoot could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

"I called Dr. Kerfoot to say thank you," Sieling said. "He said, 'You're welcome. You handled yourself very well and spoke up for yourself. You deserve to be there.' "

Penny Dragonetti of the Family Support Center said she canceled today's hearing with the judge after she received confirmation from Kerfoot in writing.

"Doing the work I do, it makes it so meaningful to me when we can help kids do something positive in their lives," Dragonetti said.

Despite his success, Sieling said he will continue to speak in support of Alicia's Law. He also hopes Southern Regional will change its policy for all students with disabilities.

"I will be at the next hearing to help it pass," Sieling said of the legislation.

The bill was approved by the Senate committee, clearing it for a full Senate vote. In order for the bill to move forward in the Assembly, the Assembly Education Committee must first approve it as well.