



School Districts and Governance Models in Vermont: Overview

School Districts

Most school districts in Vermont are either **town districts** or **union districts**.

Town school districts consist of a single town (or city), while union school districts include several towns (or parts of towns). A union district is the result of merging together two or more town districts into a single district. A school district (town or union) may operate one school, several schools, or no schools.

There are also two **interstate school districts** which include schools in Vermont and New Hampshire.

Schools/grades operated

School districts are organized to "provide for" the education of all the students who live within their boundaries, either in all grades (PK-12) or a subset of those grades (e.g., K-6, 7-12.) This is accomplished by either

- (1) operating one or more schools that collectively cover all such grades;
- (2) operating one or more schools covering some but not all such grades (see below); or
- (3) operating no schools (see below).

Providing for education in another district or school

If a district does not operate a school in some or all grades for which it is organized, then "providing for" the education of students in these grades means the district pays the cost for these students to attend school elsewhere. For example, a town district that only operates an elementary school may also be part of a union high school district, along with neighboring towns. Another option is Vermont's "tuitioning" system, in which the district makes education payments ("tuition") to a public school in another district (or state), or an independent school that Vermont has approved to receive such funds.

Number of town and union districts and grades operated

- **There are 59 town/city districts in Vermont.** Of these, 15 districts operate schools in grades PK-12, and another 33 town districts operate a subset of these grades (PK-6 or PK-8). The remaining 11 districts do not operate a school.
- **There are 60 union districts in Vermont.** Most (50) of these districts are designated "unified" union districts because they are organized to provide for education in grades PK-12; 15 of these districts pay tuition for some or all students. Of the remaining 10 union districts, six are union high school and four are union elementary districts.

In sum: Vermont's 119 school districts are half town/city and half union districts.

Also, across both types of districts, **about half (59) of all districts do not operate schools in at least one grade**, including 13 that operate no schools. This is a reflection of Vermont's predominantly rural nature: more than half of all students in our state attend school in rural areas with relatively low population density. While many of Vermont's more rural towns have a sufficient number of students to sustainably operate PK-6 or PK-8

schools— so that our youngest children can attend school close to home, the ideal— at the secondary level this is often not possible.

School boards, local electorate

Each school district has an elected Board of Directors, and (except for large city districts) town district Boards have 3 to 5 members. Union districts typically have larger Boards with members elected by town using proportional representation— although variations also exist; for example, union district Board members can be elected “at large” by the entire district. Some very large school districts (e.g., Burlington) elect Board members by Ward.

Governance models: supervisory unions and supervisory districts

Many administrative functions and services are provided to Vermont school districts – including a superintendent, business office, federal grants management, and specialized student programs— via a **supervisory union (SU)**, which the state defines as an “administrative, planning, and educational service unit.” Typical collaborative SU services provided to member districts include:

- Business & finance
- Curriculum coordination
- Federal funds distribution & management including special education
- Payroll/HR
- PreK oversight
- Student support
- Superintendent
- Technology and communications
- Transportation
- Nutrition/Student Meals

When there is just one member district (which can be a town or union district) it is called a **supervisory district (SD)**. In addition to large city SDs already in existence, many new SDs were formed after Act 46 created multi-town, merged union districts.

How are supervisory unions and supervisory districts **structurally** different?

Supervisory unions comprise several member districts (town and/or union) **that maintain their authority as separate districts**, while collaborating and sharing the costs of receiving support services. Each member district has its own school board. In addition, **the Board of each SU member district elects representatives to serve on the SU Board** which, among other duties (see 16 V.S.A. § 261a), adopts a budget for the SU, employs a superintendent, and apportions expenses for shared services among SU members.

While the districts in a supervisory union can vary in size, ***representation on the SU Board is often more closely equal; therefore, the needs of smaller districts are more likely to be heard and met.***

A supervisory district consists of one school district that internally provides the services that are typically performed by an SU. **For SDs that are merged union districts, there are no longer separate “member” districts with their own locally-voted Boards and budgets.** The district board develops one unified budget across the entire union district.

Since Board representation in a multi-town merged SD is frequently proportional by town, the voices of smaller towns are often at risk of being drowned out. Further, since these towns no longer have their own local school boards, ***the SD governance model can leave Vermont’s smaller, rural communities with very little representation in decision-making about their future.***

How are supervisory unions and supervisory districts **functionally** different?

There are many areas of functional difference between SUs and SDs. Below are listed some notable ones, especially for rural communities.

• **Decision-making**

In an SU, member districts retain local authority and oversight with respect to operation of schools, most staffing, local budgets, and other areas, while also sharing some staff and programming managed by the SU. Although there may be practical and pedagogical reasons to align some functions or practices across districts in an SU (e.g., transportation, curriculum, professional development), variation across member districts within an SU is possible and can even offer beneficial flexibility. An SU allows variations to be possible, while encouraging shared learning among member districts. Since an SD is a single district, all decisions are made centrally and apply throughout the district. Curriculum and other policies are uniformly applied. **Compared to a multi-member SU, the former districts in a multi-town merged SD often have greatly reduced local decision-making capability.**

• **Transparency and Accountability**

In several ways, **the collaborative structure of supervisory unions that serve member districts allows for more transparency and accountability than the merged supervisory district model.** For example, SU services are developed so member districts can understand how these services are distributed to them, and corresponding budgets for these services are apportioned based on district enrollment or other statutory requirements. In a merged SD, how these services and spending are distributed throughout the district is often not as clear and may not be broken down in the same way (since separate districts no longer exist.) **Having separate Boards for each SU member district and for the SU itself also increases both transparency and accountability:** parents and the broader community not only can see more directly how education dollars are spent, they also are able to connect with locally-elected officials who have more direct knowledge and understanding of their district's schools and programs.

• **Different grades operated; tuitioning**

As noted above, half of Vermont's districts do not operate schools in all grades, and several operate no schools. These districts pay to educate students in other schools, primarily via the state's tuitioning program. Note that (except in rare and special circumstances) *Vermont does not allow districts to pay tuition for students to attend school in another district if the district operates a school in those same grades.*

Thus, for example, if a district runs two K-6 schools and one K-8 school, it can only pay tuition for students in grades 9-12. This long-standing state policy comes into play when two or more districts consider merging, if the districts pay tuition for students in different grades. Using the above example: if a district that operates two K-6 schools and tuitions in other grades wants to merge with a district that operates one K-8 school and tuitions in other grades, the merger is only possible if the first district agrees to (1) tuition only in grades 9-12, and (2) send all their students in grades 7 and 8 to the K-8 school (assuming that's possible.) Put another way, the district cannot be forced as a condition of merger to designate the K-8 school for all its students in grades 7 and 8.

However, if these two districts instead want to collaborate together in a supervisory union, they could each maintain their separate tuitioning programs, if desired. **Therefore, supervisory unions provide districts with continued flexibility when it comes to grades operated and payment of tuition.** The tables below collect and summarize some of the main structural and functional differences between supervisory unions and supervisory districts, as well as the impacts of these differences.

Governance Goal	Supervisory Union	Merged Supervisory District
Decision-making	Collaborative decision-making typically made by consensus. Member districts retain authority: especially beneficial for smaller/rural districts	Proportional representation gives larger towns more power in decision-making. Formerly independent districts lose agency, especially smaller/rural districts
Representation	Usually equal member district representation on SU Board ⇒ needs of smaller/rural districts more likely met	Proportional representation by town on SD Board ⇒ needs of smaller/rural towns less likely met
Transparency & Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District budgets separated • SU services distribution clearly identified; separate SU budget; per pupil cost of central services is easily identified • Having both district and SU Boards provides layered accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local budgets no longer separated • SU-type services and budget no longer separated ; cost of central services is commingled making costs less transparent • One merged SD Board means connection to and knowledge about individual schools is more difficult
Local Community Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities have locally-elected district Board members to turn to (some of whom also sit on SU Board) • Rural communities retain authority to make decisions about their future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities have fewer local advocates; needs of smaller towns get drowned out • Rural schools at greater risk of closure or other adverse decisions by others; local voice in school closure decisions is undefined and variable

Governance Area	Supervisory Union	Supervisory District
Membership	• Two or more school districts	• One school district, often the result of mergers
Governing Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each member district has at least one representative • Typically equal or nearly equal representation (e.g., 3 reps) for all operating districts; representation can be adjusted based on SU member agreement and approval of the Vermont State Board of Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same rules as for any school board • Union/merged SDs must have proportional representation by town/city
School District Budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each SU member district develops its own budget (assisted by SU business office) adopted by individual school board • Member townspeople vote their own budget, often at Town Meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No local school district budget; single district budget, developed by SD and adopted by SD board • One budget vote, regardless of number of towns/cities in the SD, typically at an Annual Meeting by Australian ballot
SU/SD Budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed & voted by SU Board • Member districts assessed a pro-rated share which is included in voted district budgets (SU budget not voted as separate item by member district townspeople) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed by SD board • Typical SU services folded into regular SD budget & included as part of overall voted budget
Hiring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member districts hire teachers and other staff, unless: * they are part of SU services, in which case some are hired by the SU board, and others by the SU superintendent, (e.g, under federal grants.) 	All staff are hired by the SD board or the Superintendent.