



219 North Main Street, Suite 402
Barre, VT 05641 (p) 802-479-1030 | (f) 802-479-1835

Common Terms that are Frequently Confused:

School; School District; Union School District; Supervisory Union; Supervisory District; etc.

1. There are so many terms that sound the same! Are a school and a school district the same thing? A school district and a supervisory district? A supervisory union and a supervisory district? A supervisory union and a union school district?

Many current education terms are confusingly similar. People sometimes use them interchangeably as if they were the same thing – but recognizing the distinction among the terms is critical to understanding the current, multi-layered systems of education governance in Vermont. Many of these distinctions will diminish or disappear as a result of Act 46, the new school governance law. In order to respond effectively to Act 46, however, it is important to understand the terms and their corresponding structures as they currently exist.

School:

- A building in which education occurs
- Operated either by:
 - A school district and its publicly elected board
 - or
 - A private entity and its board of directors
- A location for community involvement, activity, and traditions

School District:

- A public governing unit
- Is its own independent municipality (can levy taxes, etc.)
- Responsible for *providing for* the education of all students residing within its boundaries, either by:
 - operating one or more schools
 - or
 - paying tuition on behalf of the students
 - or
 - operating some grades and paying tuition for others
- Boundaries can encompass one or more towns or portions of towns
- Organized to provide for the education of resident students in all grades (PK-12) or in some subset of grades

- Governing Board:
 - One publicly elected governing board for the entire district, regardless of the number of towns or portions of towns included in the district
 - The U.S. Constitution requires proportional representation on the board:
 - If the district includes multiple towns or portions of towns and
 - If board members are apportioned to and elected independently by each member town
- Budget:
 - Elected school board proposes a budget for all schools/grades that the district operates and the total tuition due for any grades for which the district pays tuition
 - Budget adopted only if approved by the electorate
 - If a school district includes more than one town or parts of towns, then the votes from the electorate of each town are commingled

Supervisory Union (SU):

- An “administrative, planning, and educational service unit” for two or more school districts
- Is not a municipality
- Governing Board:
 - Board representatives are appointed from among the members of each school district’s board
 - Constitutional requirements for proportional representation do not apply
- Budget:
 - The SU board adopts a budget and allocates it among the member school districts
 - The electorate does not vote directly on the SU budget; it is included in each school district’s budget
- The State Board of Education has the authority to adjust the boundaries of an SU on its own initiative or at the request of a school district (16 V.S.A. § 261 – law has been in place for over 60 years)

Supervisory District (SD):

- An SU that consists of only one PK-12 school district
 - One teachers’ contract
 - One school board
 - One set of policies to define goals
 - One budget
 - One tax rate

- Public assurance obligations, such as audits, are done for the entire SD, no matter how many schools it operates
- Large enough to have its own superintendent
- Responsible for *providing* for the education of all students residing within its boundaries, just as any school district (see above)
- Can encompass:
 - One town (*e.g.*, Burlington; Montpelier)
 - or
 - More than one town (*e.g.*, Blue Mountain SD: Groton and Ryegate)
- Budget:
 - Same as a school district – proposed by school board; every dollar spent is subject to public approval by a vote of the electorate
- Governing Board:
 - Same as school district – performs functions statutorily assigned to a school district’s board and to an SU’s board
 - May have local school councils that provide advice and are otherwise involved with decisions related to, *e.g.*, school climate and local traditions, but the overall management of the system is centralized with the elected school board to support efficiency

2. There also seem to be a lot of different ways to refer to school districts. Are they really different or are people using different names for the same things?

As with question #1, it is important to identify a school district accurately because the name provides information about its structure.

Town or City School District:

- The boundaries of the town/city are the boundaries of the district – *e.g.*:
 - Berlin School District (operates PK–6)
 - St Johnsbury School District (operates PK–8; pays tuition for 9–12)
 - Colchester School District (operates K–12)

Incorporated School District:

- Operates under a charter granted by the General Assembly – *e.g.*:
 - Barton ID (operates K–8)
 - North Bennington ID (pays tuition for K–6)

Union School District (16 V.S.A. chapter 11):

- Two or more school districts merge into one district, a union school district, for the purpose of owning, constructing, maintaining, and operating schools – *e.g.*:

- Leland & Grey Union School District (Brookline, Jamaica, Newfane, Townsend, & Windham; the district operates 7–12)
- This type of district has all the same rights and responsibilities as any school district, including: proportional representation on the school board; one tax rate for all member towns; and commingled votes of the electorate
- **A *Unified Union School District*** is a union school district that provides for the education of all PK-12 students residing within its borders – either by operating PK-12; operating some grades and paying tuition for others; or paying tuition for all grades – *e.g.*:
 - Twinfield Unified Union School District (Marshfield & Plainfield; the district operates PK-12)

Interstate School District:

- There are two districts organized to provide education to a combination of New Hampshire and Vermont students. They were created by acts of the two state legislatures and of Congress. They are Vermont schools for purposes of financing only. Vermont governance decisions do not affect them.

Note – Joint Contract School:

A “joint contract school” is *not* a school district. No separate *district* is created; rather, it is a contractual relationship between two existing districts.

- Two districts can contract to operate a school jointly (16 V.S.A. §§ 571–572)
- The underlying school districts and their school boards remain separate and distinct, but there is a third *board* made up of representatives from the districts that operates as a *joint board* – *e.g.*:
 - Jay / Westfield School (Jay School District & Westfield School District)
 - Twin Valley School (Whitingham School District & Wilmington School District)
- The underlying districts proceed as any district (*e.g.*, separate budgets; separate per-pupil spending; separate tax rates; and non-commingled votes)
- Any costs related to the joint contract school are the subject of the contact between the districts and so are included in each district’s budget.

This document is provided for guidance only and does not have the force of law. See the cited statutes for more detail.