



Public School District Governance

Prepared by: Emily Hicks, Staff Attorney

This issue brief provides a general overview of the different types of public school districts and school district governance.

TYPES OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Wisconsin public school districts are classified as one of the following: common school districts, union high school districts, unified school districts, or first-class city districts.¹ Wisconsin has a total of 421 public school districts: 365 common school districts (of which 322 serve grades K-12 and 43 serve grades K-8), 45 unified school districts, 10 union high school districts, and one first-class city school district, Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS).²

The primary difference between the three types of school districts is the meeting requirements. Common school districts and union high school districts are required to hold an annual meeting,³ while first-class city districts are required to hold regular monthly meetings,⁴ and unified school districts are not required by statute to meet at specific intervals or to have an annual meeting.⁵

Additional information about specific school districts and schools may be found in [DPI's School Directory](#).

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

School districts are governed by elected school boards. The statutes specify the number of school board members based on the type of school district structure, and provide a means to change the number of school board members and how the school board members are apportioned among the cities, towns, and villages of the school district. MPS board members serve terms of four years and are elected at the spring election.⁶ Common, union high, and unified school district board members serve terms of three years and are elected at the nonpartisan spring election.⁷

School boards of all types of school districts are responsible for the management of their school districts.⁸ The statutes authorize common, union high, and unified school district boards to tax for the maintenance of school and school district programs.⁹ The MPS board does not have taxing authority and must instead submit a budget to the city's common council.¹⁰

The statutes generally authorize school boards to adopt all policies reasonable to promote the cause of education, including the establishment, provision, and improvement of school district programs, functions, and activities for the benefit of pupils. Included in these general powers is the authority to make rules for district schools, to suspend and expel students, and to generally administer the school district.¹¹

¹ s. [115.01\(3\)](#), Stats.

² <https://dpi.wi.gov/sfs/outreach/finance-system#:~:text=Overview,is%20a%20unified%20school%20district>.

³ s. [120.08\(1\)](#), Stats.

⁴ s. [119.10\(3\)](#), Stats.

⁵ s. [120.44\(2\)](#), Stats.

⁶ s. [119.08\(2\)](#) and [\(3\)](#), Stats.

⁷ ss. [119.08\(2\)](#), [120.06\(1\)](#) and [\(3\)](#), and [120.42\(1\)](#) and [\(2\)](#), Stats.

⁸ ss. [119.16](#), [120.12](#), and [120.44](#), Stats.

⁹ ss. [120.12](#) and [120.44](#), Stats.

¹⁰ s. [119.46](#), Stats.

¹¹ ss. [119.18](#), [119.25](#), [120.13](#), and [120.44](#), Stats.