

Exploring Going Solar for Your School with Illinois Shines



Presented by Illinois Shines Program Administrator
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Today's Presenters



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About the Illinois Power Agency

The Illinois Power Agency (“IPA” or “the Agency”) was established in 2007 by Public Act 95-0481. Its mission is commitment to the planning and procurement of reliable, efficient, and cost-effective electricity for residents and businesses in an ethical and objective manner, insulated from improper influence. The IPA also administers incentive programs and procurements to promote renewable and zero-carbon energy generation, while building an equitable clean energy future for all Illinoisans. Specific goals and objectives include:



Developing annual electricity procurement plans to ensure adequate, reliable, affordable, efficient, and environmentally sustainable electric service at the lowest total cost over time.



Develop a Long-Term Renewable Resources Procurement Plan and implement the programs and procurements contained in the Plan.



Supply electricity from any Agency facilities at cost to one or more of the following: municipal electric systems, governmental aggregators, or rural electric cooperatives in Illinois.



Develop electric generation and co-generation facilities that use indigenous coal or renewable resources, or both, financed with bonds issued by the Illinois Finance Authority.



Conduct competitive procurement processes to procure the supply resources identified in the procurement plan.



Develop and implement a Zero Emission Standard Procurement Plan.

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Solar Basics



How Solar Energy Works

1. Solar panels (on-site with Distributed Generation, or remotely with Community Solar) create energy from sunlight.
2. With Distributed Generation, an inverter turns the electricity into alternating current. With Community Solar, electricity is sent to the grid and then to your school.
3. Clean, renewable solar energy helps power your school! On-site solar can be stored with a battery and even returned to the grid.

Distributed Generation



Community Solar



Benefits of Solar and Going Solar with Illinois Shines



Financial Benefits

As solar technology costs decrease and incentives increase, customers may be able to lower utility bills by generating their own electricity or subscribing to a community solar project.



Environmental Benefits

Replacing fossil fuels and traditional power plants with clean, renewable solar energy reduces air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, helps fight climate change, and contributes to a healthy environment.



Economic Growth

With hundreds of solar companies operating in the state to manufacture, sell, install, and service solar systems, solar generates enormous economic activity for Illinois.

Though customers can “go solar” on their own, Illinois Shines provides substantial, additional benefits including:

Financial incentives you may receive

Approval and compliance monitoring of Approved Vendors

Educational resources and consumer protection support

Equity opportunities for contractors, workforce, and your community

Illinois Shines Program Overview



About Illinois Shines

Illinois Shines is a state-administered incentive program that encourages the development of solar photovoltaic systems by offering incentives to offset solar development costs.

The Program was designed to support the state's renewable energy goals. Illinois utilities purchase Renewable Energy Credits (RECs) produced by participating projects from Approved Vendors, allowing participants to offset project development costs.

The Public Schools Category was incorporated into the Program in 2021 following the enhancement of public Act 102-0662, also known as the Climate and Equity Jobs Act (CEJA).



About Illinois Shines

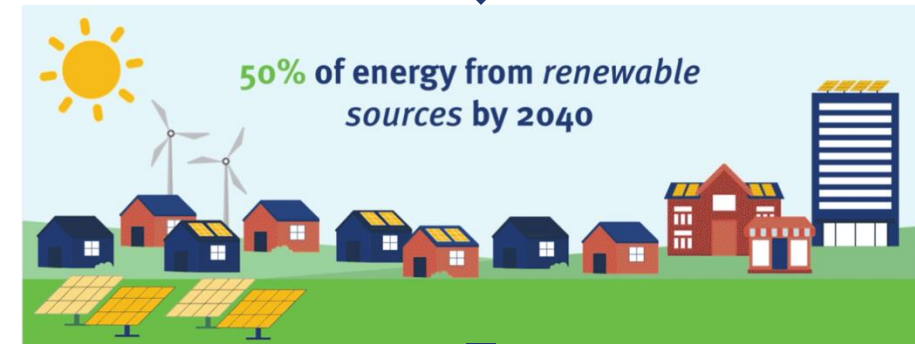
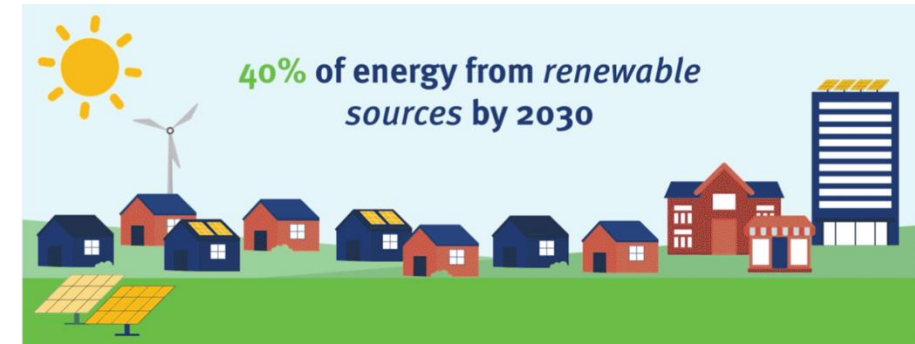
Illinois Shines ensures that together, we can all play a role in our clean energy future and supports the State's renewable and clean energy targets.

Renewable energy as defined in Illinois law includes solar, wind, hydropower in certain circumstances, anaerobic digestion, and crops and untreated and unadulterated organic waste biomass).

Clean energy as defined in Illinois law is energy generation that is 90% or greater free of carbon dioxide emissions. In Illinois, some energies qualify as clean energy but not as renewable energy.

Illinois targets include:

- 40% of energy from renewable sources by 2030
- 50% of energy from renewable sources by 2040
- 100% of energy from clean sources by 2050



Entities and Roles Within the Program



**Project hosts or
owners**



**The Illinois Power
Agency (IPA)**



**Approved Vendors
(AVs)**



**Utilities operating in
the state of Illinois**



**The Program
Administrator**

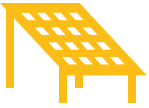
Project Categories

The Program created separate categories targeting the needs of developers and Illinois residents and businesses. Current project categories include:



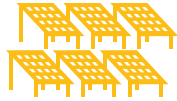
Public Schools

Any solar project, whether Small or Large Distributed Generation, or Community Solar project that serves a public school in Illinois. K-12, community colleges, and school districts are eligible to participate in this project category.



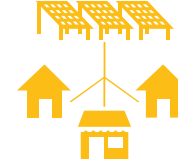
Small Distributed Generation

Projects up to and including 25 kW in size suited for homeowners and small businesses.



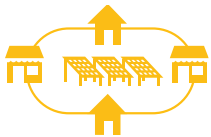
Large Distributed Generation

Projects greater than 25 kW and up to and including 5 MW in size, such as large installations targeting business and utility-scale power producers.



Traditional Community Solar

Projects up to 5MW in size targeting those who are unable to host a project on their property.



Community-Driven Community Solar

Projects up to 5MW for which development is driven by the members of the community the project will serve.



Equity Eligible Contractors

Projects submitted by an Equity Eligible Contractor (EEC) Approved Vendor certified by the Program. Can be either Small DG, Large DG, or Community Solar projects.


Public Schools Success with Illinois Shines

Read our case study highlighting how a rural district found workable solutions to going solar with Illinois Shines, reducing its electricity expenses and turning its school into a hands on renewable energy learning hub.




Case Study

April 2025

Palestine, IL School District Turns to Illinois Shines Solar Project to Achieve Important Financial and Environmental Benefits



129.6 kW solar installation at Palestine (IL) Grade School



Summary

In the village of Palestine, Illinois, a public school district tackled its financial challenges with an innovative, sustainable solution: solar energy. Motivated by the potential for both cost savings and environmental benefits, Palestine School District (CUSD#) leveraged the Illinois Shines program to tap into state incentives and bring their solar ambitions to life. By collaborating with an Approved Vendor vetted by the Program and opting for a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) to share upfront costs, the district reduced its electricity expenses and turned its school into a hands-on renewable energy learning hub. This case study highlights how a rural district found workable solutions to going solar, fostered community support, and created a brighter future for students.

Facing the Challenge

Like many public school districts, Palestine School District is challenged to maintain and improve its facilities while managing expenses within a limited budget. Large capital projects can also disrupt school operations and typically require the support and involvement of key community stakeholders and technical experts, which can lengthen planning, funding, and implementation timelines. The district considered whether solar panels could generate cost savings while improving its facility, and if it could take advantage of Illinois Shines, a state-administered program that encourages the development of solar systems through incentives that help offset project costs. The Program offers special incentives for solar projects that serve Illinois K-12 public schools and higher education institutions.

Developing a Solution

Project Planning

Palestine School District recognized that having a project champion could help prepare the school and its board members to explore the possibility of solar, and to lay the groundwork for future planning and development.

1. Approved Vendors are entities approved by the Program Administrator (as an agent of the Illinois Power Agency) to submit project applications to the Illinois Shines Program.
2. Power Purchase Agreement (PPA). Customer pays monthly for the electricity generated by the system using an agreed upon rate per kilowatt-hour.



Project Details

Project Name:
Palestine Grade School (CUSD#)

System Size:
129.6 kW

Expected yearly energy production:
218.4 MWh

Financing Type:
Power Purchase Agreement

Duration:
5 years

Annual Energy Savings:
\$23,000 in Year 1, and further future savings

Illinois Shines Project Category:
Public Schools

Project Type:
Distributed Generation

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Fortunately, its school board Vice President was willing to play the role. The Vice President was familiar with solar development in Illinois, about the kinds of financial and environmental improvements it offered, and about Illinois Shines, which offers flexibility for schools to work with Approved Vendors to develop solar projects (rooftop, ground mount, or community solar) with various financing options. Approved Vendors play a key role, managing contracts with utilities, overseeing the development of solar projects, and handling the renewable energy credits (RECs) generated by the projects - and then pass REC incentives on to customers as agreed upfront. Recognizing the project's potential, the Vice President secured the support of the school Superintendent and created a stakeholder team of decision makers from the school board, school administration, parent-teacher organization, teachers, buildings and grounds staff, and the community to help guide the project.

Research and Bidding

With this preparation complete, the district got to work, and advanced the project in three phases:

- The Vice President contacted a solar developer to understand the potential financial and environmental benefits this project could offer the district. The short- and long-term calculations were favorable, and crucial to convincing community members, parent-teacher organizations, and school board members of the project's value.
- The school explored several different funding sources and programs to optimize financials and decided on the Illinois Shines Program incentives (both a Power Purchase Agreement or "PPA" financing model), Solar Investment Tax Credits (ITC), and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER). With support in place, the Vice President and Superintendent issued a request for proposals (RFP) and evaluated proposals from three solar developers.
- The district ultimately selected an Approved Vendor in the Illinois Shines program, which provides project capacity with accompanying incentives and financial flexibility, stakeholder resources, rigorous consumer protections, and program compliance requirements of its Approved Vendors. The Program's required Disclosure Forms helped the district clearly understand the specific details of the proposed system and its expected performance, costs, and financial benefits.

"The solar project has been a transformative step for our school, not only reducing our energy costs but also providing a sustainable, eco-friendly learning environment for our students. The installation process was smooth and efficient, and we're proud to lead by example in teaching the next generation about the importance of renewable energy. This project has truly empowered our school community to embrace a greener future."

- Jessica Shill, Palestine School District Superintendent and Grade School Principal



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Results

The district soon developed a 129.6kW ground-mounted array - about the size of a basketball courts. The project's PPA financing allowed the school to pay a lower, agreed upon price-per-kilowatt hour for the system's generated electricity than it would have paid the utility, and minimized upfront costs versus an outright purchase. Along with its contract terms, the project yielded immediate energy savings and benefits for the school district through participation in Illinois Shines - amounting to \$23,000 in 2024, the first year the system was operating. These savings improved their Operations and Maintenance budget and can be redirected to educational priorities. The project has provided other value to Palestine School District students, as renewable energy studies have been incorporated into the school's curriculum, providing a real-world example of renewable energy in action and a hands-on opportunity to learn about solar technology and the power of the sun.

Key Lessons Learned

- Schedule project installation to minimize school disruptions. To minimize operational disruptions, the district began project planning in the fall and planned construction for summer break. The Illinois Shines Approved Vendor managed most technical installation areas, and relied on the district's maintenance and grounds team for select tasks which simplified the school's involvement. However, the district believes that involving school architects earlier in the project can help streamline the engineering process.
- To facilitate to achieve your goals. Though well planned, the project encountered unexpected delays and increased costs during the interconnection process. In response, the district reduced the size of the planned solar array, and though it changed the project's economics and added several months to the project, it ultimately allowed the school to move forward with the project and start realizing its benefits. The Approved Vendor led the conversations with the utility and worked closely with the school on the adjusted timeline.
- Explore all funding and financing options. To make the project financially viable, the district researched and navigated multiple financing options and incentives, such as the ITC and ESSER. Stacking incentives and credits - including negotiating a Direct Pay provision - made the project proposal more attractive to the school board but required time and research from the planning team.

Interested in starting a Solar Project at Your School?

Is your school considering going solar? The Illinois Shines program has incentives for K-12 public schools and public institutions of higher education and offers a step-by-step Solar Project Guide to get you started.



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illinoisshines.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Illinois-Shines-Case-Study-Palestine-IL-School-District-1May2025.pdf

How Illinois Shines Supports Public Schools

In addition to helping the state meet its renewable energy portfolio goals, schools that participate in the Program benefit through:



Incentive payments for renewable energy credits (RECs) that can help **bring down the upfront cost of solar installation.**



Depending on the school's current electricity rate and proper system sizing, a school may **save on monthly electricity costs** if/when the solar installation becomes its main source of electricity.



Educational opportunities for students and the community to learn about solar energy and renewable energy projects in general.

Exploring Solar for Your School



Public Schools Carbon-Free Assessment



ComEd and Ameren Illinois are required to offer public schools Carbon Free-Assessments to provide a comprehensive analysis of their energy usage and pathways to transition to carbon-free power.

The Illinois Power Agency (IPA) has published all reports on their website in a [searchable database](#).

Each report will have a section dedicated to solar energy opportunities for your school and/or district. This section will include information on:

- Potential size and energy production of the solar project
- Estimated annual savings
- Considerations before pursuing solar (condition of roof, land required, etc.)

Public Schools Project Types

Illinois Shines supports solar energy across two main project types - Distributed Generation or Community Solar.

Distributed Generation

A project designed to meet the electric needs of a school or district building.



Community Solar

A large solar project designed to meet the electricity needs of many subscribers. This type of project could meet not only a school district's combined energy needs but also supply electricity to other community members or businesses. Customers can subscribe to CS projects within their utility's service area.



REC Contracts

All projects in the Program will enter a REC Contract. The contractual parties are the Approved Vendor (AV, seller of RECs) and the Utility (buyer of RECs).

The contract facilitates the transfer of RECs from the AV to the utility, and incentive payments from the utility to the AV.

REC Contract Length and Payments

- REC contracts for projects participating in the Public Schools category have 20-year terms.
- Incentive payments will be made to Approved Vendors quarterly based on the amount of energy generated.



**1
REC**

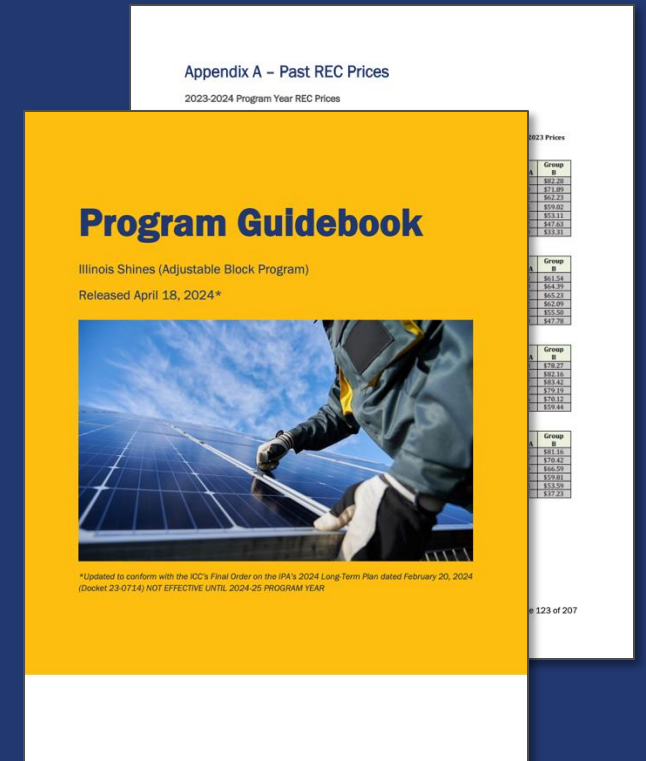
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**1 MWh of
renewable energy**

View program rates in our
Program Guidebook

illinoisshines.com/program-documents/#program-guidebook



Public School Category – Requirements



Community Solar Project Requirements

- The public school or school district at which the project is sited must be an anchor subscriber to the Community Solar project, commonly referred to as an “anchor tenant”. As such, the public school or school district must subscribe to a minimum of 10% of the project’s capacity, without exceeding 40% of the project’s capacity.
- 50% of the project capacity must be allocated to small subscribers (subscriptions that are less than 25 kW in size).



Land Ownership

- A school/district must own the land on which a project submitted to the Public Schools category is sited.
 - Projects developed on land leased by a school/district are not permitted for submission to this category, unless the public school is sited on the same parcel of leased land.
- A school/district must continue to own the land the project is sited on for the entire lifetime of the REC Contract (20 years).

Solar Financing Types

Illinois Shines provides three common financing options for going solar, including:



Purchase:

Buy the project outright or finance with a loan.



Lease:

Make regular payments to the project owner.



Power Purchase Agreement (PPA):

Pay the project owner for the electricity generated by the project at an agreed upon per kilowatt-hour rate.



Additional Financing Opportunities

To make projects more financially viable, schools can research and explore additional financing options and incentives, outside of Illinois Shines/the Illinois Power Agency



Federal

- [IRA Direct Pay Tax Credits](#)
- [Renew America's Schools Grant](#) (U.S. Department of Energy)
- [Clean School Bus Program](#) (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency)
- [Climate Change Resources for Educators and Students](#) (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency)



State

- [ISBE School Construction Project Grants](#)
- [The Illinois Climate Bank](#)



Other

- [Ameren's Educational Facilities Incentives](#)
- [ComEd's Distributed Generation Rebates](#)

Getting Underway with Project Planning



Getting Underway with Project Planning

The planning process for each project varies, but to get your school's research and planning started:



1. Create a team to guide the project:

A team lead should be identified as the first point of contact when working with both the Program Administrator and Approved Vendors. Your organization may be interested in becoming an Approved Vendor in the program – Approved Vendors must meet a variety of obligations throughout the 20-year term of the REC contract, such as providing quarterly invoices to the utility, submitting annual reports to the Program Administrator, etc.



2. Conduct an energy audit and roof assessment:

An energy audit will help determine the size and type of solar system your school needs and estimate potential energy savings. Evaluations of the campus's electrical infrastructure and roofs should be completed to ensure solar readiness.



3. Choose a participation avenue:

Your school can participate in the Program in several ways — a rooftop or ground mounted system, and a DG or Community Solar system.

Getting Underway with Project Planning (continued)



4. Identify the solar developer you will work with:

Public Schools projects being submitted to the Illinois Shines program must be submitted by an Approved Vendor. The program website has a [list of Approved Vendors](#). Your school's bidding process may have additional requirements to consider.



5. Submit project to the Program:

Once the school has identified a developer, chosen a solar project type and location, and determined a financing type, then the project can be submitted to the Illinois Shines program. The project can be submitted by an Approved Vendor, or, alternatively, the school may choose to register as an Approved Vendor with the Program and submit the project.



6. Educate your community:

Your school can use its participation in the Illinois Shines program and the resulting project installed as an educational opportunity for students, parents, and the wider community.

Additional Items to Consider



Request for Proposal (RFP) process

In addition to utilizing district-approved templates and processes, schools should indicate:

- The project will be submitted to the Illinois Shines Program
- Only Illinois Shines Approved Vendors will be considered



Project budget

- Outlines financing type
- Lists projected savings from incentives and reduced energy bills



Timeline of project development and installation

- The final stages of project installation will most likely require limited interruption to power supply and access to the school internal or external electrical systems.
- While construction schedules will vary for each Approved Vendor, requesting project construction during the summer break can be included in the RFP.

Interested to
Learn More?
Schedule a 1:1
Workshop



Public Schools Workshop

Illinois Shines Program Administrator is offering personalized, one-on-one workshops for public schools. These sessions are tailored to your school or district and include:

- Review of your school's Carbon-Free Assessment results
- Discussion of your solar energy potential
- Answers to any questions you may have about project planning, financing, and Illinois Shines incentives

To schedule your session, contact us at schools@illinoisshines.com



Resources



Resources

- [Public Schools Hub](#)
- [Public Schools Project Guide](#)
- [Illinois Shines Public School Category](#)
- [Other Funding Sources](#)
- [IPA's Power Hour: Clean Energy Future for Public Schools: Benefits and Challenges](#)
- [Public Schools Case Study](#)

These resources and more available at
illinoisshines.com/public-schools



Questions and Contact Information



Thank you!

For additional questions or support, please contact:

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