Public Schools Solar Project Guide

with Illinois Shines

Is your school considering "going solar"? The Illinois Shines program has incentives for K-12 public schools and public institutions of higher education! This guide outlines the necessary steps a School can take to go solar.

Step 1. Create a Team to Guide the Project

Start by building a small, internal team of administration, facilities, and educational staff to lead the project. This team will review how solar projects can be developed under Illinois Shines, available incentives, the best system design for your school, and the total cost. Illinois Shines has a dedicated Public Schools Strategist who can share program details and resources, set up a tailored workshop for your school, and share success stories from other schools.

A successful project typically begins by bringing together district leadership, facilities professionals, educators, and outside partners.

- **School District Administrators** - Set the district-wide vision, approve budgets and capital plans, and help guide the overall project direction to make sure solar is a responsible and cost-effective investment. They review long-term cost and savings projections, analyze finance and contract terms, oversee purchasing and proposals, help guide communication with the school board, champion the project publicly, and ensure Program compliance.
- **Facilities and Operations Teams** - Essential partners who can help evaluate the physical conditions of the site—including whether the system should be mounted on the ground or roof—its electrical system's capacity, and determine whether onsite (distributed generation) or community solar make the most sense. They also coordinate site visits and installation logistics with the solar developer, to minimize disruption to students, and support safe construction practices.
- **Educators and Solar Champions** - STEM teachers, sustainability–minded faculty, and parents, including Parent Teacher Organizations, who can help champion solar projects! From advocating for sustainability at PTO and community meetings, to incorporating solar into student lessons plans, these team members play a key role in generating community support and enthusiasm.

Step 2. Conduct an Energy Audit and Roof/Grounds Assessment

You can assess project possibilities for your school by examining your buildings and grounds, your current and projected energy use, and other facilities improvement possibilities. Your facilities and operations staff are critical contributors here.

Many schools begin with a Public Schools Carbon-Free Assessment, a smart first step in your solar journey to see where solar fits into your school's capital and energy strategy. Public School Carbon-Free Assessments are free energy evaluations offered by ComEd and Ameren to all Illinois public schools in the ComEd or Ameren service territory. These assessments help schools understand how their buildings currently utilize energy and identify opportunities to improve energy efficiency, reduce energy use, and implement upgrades, like solar power, that will have the most impact towards becoming carbon-free.

Step 3. Choose a Project Type

Your school can participate in Illinois Shines through either of the program's primary project types: Distributed Generation ("DG") or Community Solar ("CS").

- DG projects serve only the school's electricity needs. Schools can plan and install projects of this type themselves, or with an Illinois Shines Approved Vendor. The evaluation of financing options, planning, and installation can be accomplished through a developer.
- CS projects, which are larger solar arrays, can serve multiple customers through subscriptions. CS projects may be onsite or offsite, and their size can allow the local community to take advantage of the project. CS projects submitted to the Public Schools category must be sited on district- or school-owned land.

Your school's current energy use and potential offset through solar, available space required for installation, ownership & financing options, and maintenance are all factors to consider in project type and size. Our team can share project information about other schools who have gone solar through Illinois Shines.

Considerations	Distributed Generation	Community Solar
Energy Use Offset	The energy use of the school and/or district facilities where the project is installed.	The energy use of the school where the project is installed, as well as local residents, and businesses in the community. Energy users from outside the community may subscribe to the project as well to offset their electricity needs.
Available Space Required for Install	Distributed Generation projects seek to only address the energy needs of the site where the project is located, making the footprint of these projects much smaller than Community Solar projects.	Community Solar projects are often larger, as they accommodate more than one energy-user. Thus these larger projects are often ground-mounted as they need to be larger than most roofs can accommodate. The larger projects are usually sized around 2-5 MW, which could be as much as 10-25 acres.
Ownership & Financing Options	With Distributed Generation projects there are 3 financing options: ownership, leasing the project, or financing through a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA).	School ownership of Community Solar projects is less likely due to the fact that larger systems have a larger upfront capital cost, as well as the complexity of subscriber management for other subscribers to the Community Solar project.
Maintenance	Maintenance responsibilities depend on financing structure and agreement between the project developer and the customer. Usually with a leased system or PPA, maintenance is included.	System maintenance and subscriber management is usually performed by the system owner or project developer, but depends on the written agreement between the system host and project developer.

This table is a high-level overview of possible participation avenues meant to guide research.

Step 4. Find or Become an Illinois Shines Approved Vendor

Approved Vendors are entities approved by Illinois Shines to submit project applications, which result in contracts to which they are counterparties. AVs have important program responsibilities and requirements, and interested entities must complete and submit an Approved Vendor application form, which will be reviewed and approved by the Program Administrator. The approval process must be completed before any project applications can be submitted by an Approved Vendor to the Program. Some schools become Approved Vendors (even to submit a single project application) while others work with existing Approved Vendors. You can learn more about becoming an AV **here**, or find a list of AVs **here**. The Illinois Shines website also provides resources such as the **Introduction to Illinois Shines: Solar Basics & More** guide, and other materials, including helpful tips, questions to ask and more.

Step 5. Explore Financing Options and Funding Opportunities

Illinois Shines provides valuable incentives that can reduce the total price of constructing a solar project! The Illinois Shines team can answer questions about financing types, including Purchase, Lease, or Power Purchase Agreements for distributed generation, or how community solar can boost community engagement. The Illinois Shines team can also share information about **other funding sources available to public schools** and tax benefits offered outside the program, such as the federal clean energy tax credit accessible through **Elective Pay** through 2027. Your district should determine the approach that best fits your budget and financing needs and long-term goals.

Step 6. Engage Community Stakeholders

School boards, parents, staff, and students often have questions, and speaking with them is a chance to build excitement for solar! Solar project teams should share project goals, potential savings, financial projections, educational and health benefits, and timelines with community stakeholders. Illinois Shines can provide program information for presentations, FAQs, examples and success stories from other schools, and more as you build support across your community.

After gathering stakeholder input, some schools build a request for proposals (RFP) to solicit bids for their desired criteria from interested solar developers, including Illinois Shines Approved Vendors.

Step 7. Get Ready to Submit Your Project Application

To participate in Illinois Shines and benefit from incentives and other support, public schools must submit a project application for Program approval. Once you've selected a path forward, whether on your own or with an Illinois Shines Approved Vendor, Illinois Shines can support your project team as you finalize design details, confirm financial terms, and prepare the necessary documentation for your project application. If you're working with an Illinois Shines Approved Vendor, they'll submit the project application and keep you informed as the project moves from review to approval to construction.

For questions regarding the Illinois Shines program, please email **schools@illinoisshines.com**.