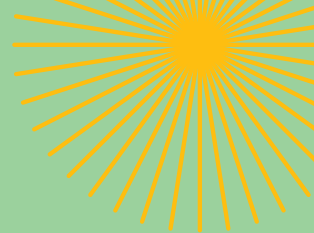


Public Schools Solar Project Guide

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.

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 these utilities’ respective service territories. 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 construct either a distributed generation (DG) or a community solar (CS) project to participate in the program. Learn more about each project type below.

- A distributed generation (DG) system is located on-site and generates electricity that serves only the school it is constructed on. The installation can be accomplished through a developer or by the school itself, and can be financed through direct purchase, a lease, or a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA). On-site projects can be located on a rooftop, a parking lot canopy system, or on the ground.
- A school can install a community solar (CS) project with the help of a solar developer. Community solar projects are large systems that serve a school's electrical needs and multiple utility customers through subscriptions. This approach allows the entire community to take advantage of the project. In the Illinois Shines Public School category, Community Solar projects will have to abide by the following requirements:
 - The school must act as an "anchor tenant" for the life of the project, subscribing to at minimum 10% and no more than 40% of the project's energy generation
 - The project must retain at least 50% of capacity for small subscribers (subscriptions of less than 25 kW)

Choosing a Project Type

Considerations when choosing a project type may include:

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	The footprint of these projects is much smaller than Community Solar projects, as they only address the energy needs of the site where the project is located. The average project is about 390 kW, which typically covers 27,300-39,000 square feet.	Community Solar projects are often larger, as they accommodate more than one energy-user. These larger projects are often ground mounted, as they are too large for most roofs to accommodate. CS projects are usually sized around 2-5 MW, which could cover up to 10-25 acres.
Ownership & Financing Options	DG projects can be owned directly by the end use customer (Purchase), or owned by the solar company and utilized on site through a Lease or Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) .	Community Solar projects are not typically owned by the school or anchor tenant due to the large upfront capital cost and the complexity of the subscriber model. Instead, schools work with a solar company that will be the owner of the project and pay for a monthly subscription to the solar energy produced by the project.

Considerations	Distributed Generation	Community Solar
REC Contract Terms	The REC contract has a term of 15-years. Projects that are smaller than or equal to 25 kW will receive 50% of the REC payment at Energization and the rest paid out quarterly over the next six years. Projects that are greater than 25 kW will receive 15% of the REC payment at Energization and the rest paid out quarterly over the next six years.*	The REC contract has a term of 20-years. REC payments will be delivered to the Approved Vendor quarterly as the project produces energy.
Maintenance	If the project was purchased outright, the school is responsible for maintenance costs, as they are the system's owner. With a leased system or PPA, maintenance is often covered by the solar company. Whether maintenance is included in the lease or PPA payments should be reflected in your customer contract.	System maintenance 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 vetted by Illinois Shines to submit project applications. AVs have important program responsibilities and requirements, and interested entities must apply to participate in the Program. This approval process must be completed before any project applications can be submitted to the Program. Schools can find an AV to work with through the Illinois Shines' [Find an AV directory](#) or learn more about becoming an AV [here](#).

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](#) for projects completed by the end of 2027. Your district should determine the approach that best fits your budget and financing needs and long-term goals.

Step 6. Engage Community Stakeholders

An important component of any school solar project is educating students, parents, and the larger community about the project's details and benefits. Your school can build solar education into student curricula to demonstrate the project's energy generation or highlight the energy and cost savings to board members and parents. 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.

* Please note that these REC Contract terms are effective for Distributed Generation projects participating in the Public Schools category approved in the Program on or after June 1, 2026.

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 AVs. Utilize our [solar toolkit](#) for tips to evaluate an AV.

Step 7. Get Ready to Submit Your Project Application

Once you have identified an AV, a solar project type, and a financing type, the Approved Vendor will submit an application to the Illinois Shines program on the school's behalf. Alternatively, the school may choose to register as an Approved Vendor with the Program and submit the project itself.

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.



We encourage public schools to take advantage of the Illinois Shines program and explore the opportunities offered to schools, students, and communities.

For more information on the Program and how to participate, please visit the [Illinois Shines website](#) or contact the Program Administrator's dedicated Public Schools Strategist (schools@illinoisshines.com) who can provide resources, set up a tailored workshop for your school, and share success stories from other schools.

