

Illinois Shines Program

Public Schools Outreach Action Plan

Program Year 2026-27

November, 2026

Illinois Shines | IPA ILLINOIS POWER AGENCY

Energy Solutions
Program Administrator

Program Year 2026-27

The Public Schools Outreach Plan for the Illinois Shines 2026-2027 Program Year is being implemented to address known barriers experienced by schools and school districts when they consider a solar energy project. This plan includes a purpose statement, goals, expected end results, implementation strategies and a table of priority action items.

Purpose Statement

In 2022, the Illinois Power Agency (IPA) created a new Illinois Shines Program category for Illinois Public Schools. Since its creation, the category has underperformed, with fewer projects being submitted than anticipated. The IPA recognizes the multi-layered decision-making structure, complex budget considerations and tight timelines that public schools face when considering building enhancement projects like solar energy. For Program Year 2026-27, the IPA's Program Administrator for the Illinois Shines program, Energy Solutions, developed and will implement this outreach plan to assist school decision-makers in moving forward with submitting solar project applications to the Illinois Shines program. Implementation strategies include targeted relationship building with public school professionals, education association engagement, conference attendance, and one-on-one meetings with priority schools and districts.

Successes from the Program Year 2025-26 Outreach Plan

Using last year's outreach action plan enabled the Public Schools Sector Strategist to execute a more targeted and consistent engagement strategy. The plan provided clear priorities and communication touchpoints, leading to stronger connections with public schools, increased program awareness, and project applications being submitted. The following is the list of successes from Program Year 2025-26:

- **16** applications submitted and verified in the Public Schools Category
- **6** applications submitted for projects at Tier 1, Tier 2, or Equity Investment Eligible Community (EIEC)-located schools
- **10** presentations completed at industry conferences and for organizations that support public schools
- **4** 1:1 workshops provided to schools
- **15** Program Advisor relationships established

Lessons Learned Program Year 2025-26

Establishing an outreach action plan reinforces the importance of strategic planning and consistent execution. Having a structured roadmap fosters more focus on relationship-building, which produces stronger outcomes. The following is the list of lessons learned from Program Year 2025-26:

- Public Schools often need to combine multiple funding sources to approve a solar project. Providing additional guidance on other funding that is available and how to combine that funding with the Illinois Shines incentives is a strong strategy to help a public school push a solar project forward.
- Public Schools are managing an overwhelming number of initiatives, with district teams often stretched beyond their capacity to effectively oversee and implement multiple projects at once. This strain is compounded by pressure induced by companies trying to offer different services to schools. Simplifying the decision-making process for public schools by aligning solar projects with school district priorities, and collaborating with AVs to serve as a project management resource will help with alleviating these stressors.
- It's best to target schools with more flexible participation models, including community solar and third-party financing structures, to overcome capital and procurement barriers.
- Despite available incentives and increased outreach, public school adoption remains relatively low, highlighting a large untapped market.

Program Year 2026-27 Goals and End Results

The overall goal of this plan is to increase awareness and participation of the Illinois Shines program Public Schools category among K-12 schools, districts, community colleges and public institutions of higher education. The expected result will be an increase in the number of projects submitted to the Public Schools category for Program Year 2026-27. The following is the list of goals and end results:

- Increase participation in the Public Schools category by at least 10 projects for Program Year 2026-27.
- Increase participation Tier 1/Tier 2/EIEC-located schools participation in the Illinois Shines Public Schools category to at least a total of 10 new project submissions.
- Connect with at least 20 public schools that have completed an Illinois Shines solar project in a previous year to produce at least 10 referrals to public schools who have not completed solar projects.
- Develop and/or maintain at least 20 Program Advisor relationships with public schools, Regional Education Offices (ROEs) school districts, or professional organizations/business associated with public schools.
- Attend and present Program information to at least 14 education, district or administrative conferences, or other networking opportunities.
- Provide workshops to key stakeholders in at least 8 schools that have received a Carbon Free Assessment and have been identified as a strong candidate for solar energy adoption.

Implementation Strategies

Implementation strategies for reaching public schools include:

- **Conduct targeted outreach** to Illinois public schools with completed utility-provided Carbon Free Assessments (CFAs) and that are in Equity Investment Eligible Communities (EIECs).
- **Educate Approved Vendors (AVs) and public schools** on the 15-year Renewable Energy Credit (REC) contract structure for Public School Distributed Generation (DG) projects on or after June 1st, 2026.
- **Submit proposals for presentations** at conferences and present at association meetings and during webinars to encourage more interest in the Public Schools Category within Illinois Shines.
- **Schedule 1:1 Workshops** with individual school districts and schools to tailor the solar conversation to their individual needs.
- **Strengthen outreach efforts** by identifying key decision-makers involved in successful school solar projects, building relationships with school leaders and staff, and tracking budget and planning timelines for public schools, universities, and community colleges.
- **Leveraging existing and new partnerships** to expand relationships with public school administrators, present the Illinois Shines Program, and guide schools through the process of pursuing solar projects.

Action Items Timeline

June – Aug 2026	Sept – Nov 2026	Dec 2026	Jan – May 2026	Ongoing
Refine list of priority schools and conduct outreach and secure presentation opportunities	Ongoing outreach and connecting with schools that were previous participants in Illinois Shines	Host Public Schools Roundtable	Provide presentations and 1:1 support to schools	Provide regular status reports on progress

Summary of 2026-2027 Public Schools Sector Touchpoints

- AV 1:1 Meetings
- AV email and call communication
- Weekly Program office hours
- 2026 Public Schools Roundtable
- Presentations at education association conferences
- 1:1 meetings with individual schools
- Host program awareness calls with Tier 1 and Tier 2 schools with Carbon Free Assessments
- Digital marketing and social media campaign