Solar 4 Schools: Pennsylvania Learns from National Best Practices

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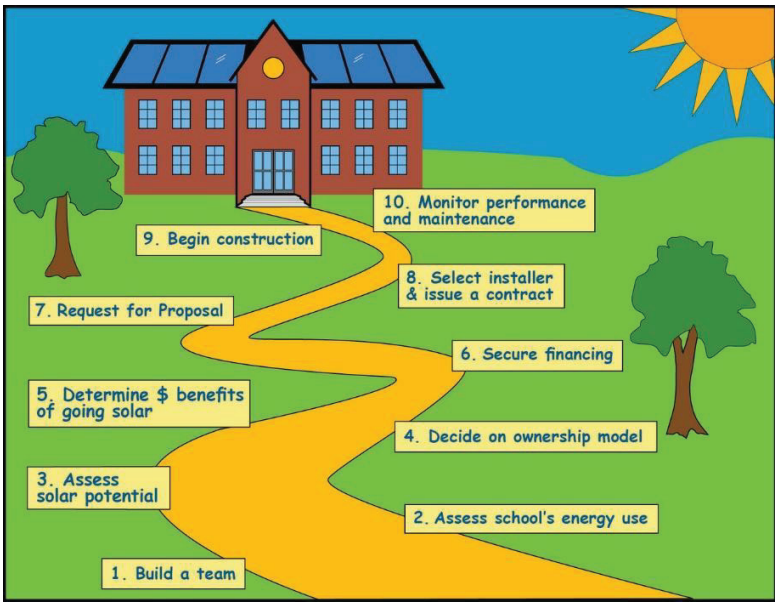

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Solar energy has many compelling advantages for virtually everyone, but schools may have the most compelling and urgent reasons to go solar. Solar can:

- Save money for school districts with chronically tight operating budgets
- Stabilize energy costs by avoiding the pain of future electricity rate hikes
- Reduce pollution and help reach federal, state and local emission reduction goals
- Improve STEM education
- Help to prepare students for jobs and careers of the future
- Lead by example for students, their families and local communities

Pennsylvania, a state with hundreds of years of history as a leader in fossil fuel extraction, has not exactly been friendly to clean energy sources such as solar. On a per capita basis, PA is dead last in solar production of all East Coast states. [1] PA has also systematically under-funded education, particularly its public schools in lower income communities, so much so that the state is now under a court order to remedy its inequitable distribution of funding for public schools.[2] Solar energy can help solve this problem.

In February of 2022, PA State Representative Liz Fiedler, began working on a Solar 4 Schools grant program for Pennsylvania. She started by getting Governor Shapiro's

[1] Philadelphia Solar Energy Association, Ron Celentano analysis, see PSEA website
[2] Public Interest Law Center

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backing, and by gathering support from all the major unions in the state. She then reached out to the solar industry and to nonprofits to get their feedback and assistance in drafting the legislation. These organizations, with deep technical and programmatic experience, provided guidance to refine the language of the bill, taking full advantage of all the federal level incentives in the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), as well as utility rebates and other incentives.

The next step was to gather strong bipartisan co-sponsorship in both the House and Senate. Once the bill was introduced, Rep. Fiedler organized a series of press conferences across the state at schools that had already installed solar systems. She invited the local and state level public officials, labor unions, school officials and other stakeholders to join her in educating the public on the importance of solar on schools as a way to save money, improve STEM education, prepare students for energy jobs of the future and reduce pollution. Each press conference had a very specific local flavor, and when possible, included students demonstrating their knowledge of solar energy. Each event was covered by local print and television media and amplified on social media.

The bill passed with very strong bipartisan support in the House in late 2023, and passed in the Republican controlled Senate in June of 2024. An appropriation of $25 million dollars was included in the final state budget, which also passed in late June.

The bill's language required the program to be stood up within three months. Given that the state had no previous experience with a Solar Schools grant program, it was essential to reach out to other states with successful programs. The ASES Chapter network played a key role here, connecting the dots between Pennsylvania and Minnesota. The Minnesota Department of Commerce staff were very generous with their time and expertise, providing invaluable guidance and advice to the PA staff at the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED).

The PA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) had also laid the groundwork by hiring the Philadelphia Solar Energy Association to produce the Solar Schools Toolkit [3] a detailed guide to going solar. Many schools were already considering solar and some were actively engaged in the process.

PA was able to publish the program guidelines and application form on DCED's website[4] in October of 2024 and opened the application period on November 1, 2024 through January 31, 2025. The guidelines are quite rigorous, requiring a letter from the local utility, acknowledging the school's intent to interconnect and a professional level solar survey and assessment by a party other than the intended solar contractor. Fortunately,

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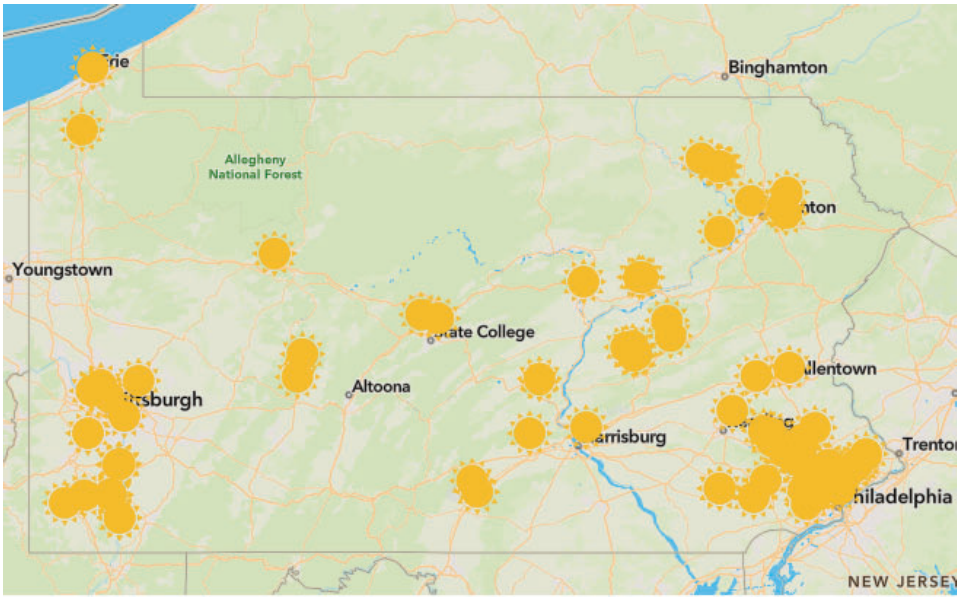
[3] https://greenport.pa.gov/elibrary/GetDocument?docId=8342175&DocName=SOLAR%20FOR%20SCHOOLS%20TOOLKIT:%20A%20GUIDE%20TO%20HELP%20PENNSYLVANIA%20SCHOOLS%20GO%20SOLAR%20AND%20SAVE%202024.PDF%20%20%3cspan%20style%3D%22color:green%3b%22%3e%3c/span%3e%20%3cspan%20style%3D%22color:blue%3b%22%3e%28NEW%29%3c/span%3e%204/19/2026

[4] https://dced.pa.gov/programs/solar-for-schools-grant-program-s4s/

three organizations, the Pennsylvania Solar Center, Generation 180 and the Philadelphia Energy Authority (PEA) had the ability to provide this technical assistance to schools statewide at no cost to the school. These groups and a number of others were also busy providing outreach to schools statewide to let them know about the availability of the grant program and the technical assistance.

When the application period closed at the end of January, DCED had received 88 complete applications from schools requesting more than $85 million across Pennsylvania. DCED announced grants to 74 schools in May of 2025, less than one year after the bill passed! The lucky schools that have been funded will begin saving money as early as 2026 – perfect timing to reduce the full impact of very significant rate increases PA has experienced in 2025.

The timing could not have been better! The Philadelphia Energy Authority estimates that the average Philadelphia public school will save more than $1 million dollars by installing solar. This map shows the geographic distribution of the Solar Schools grants across Pennsylvania.



Solar For Schools grant recipients. May 2025

The ability of Pennsylvania to launch this program so quickly, and apparently successfully, is due entirely to the fact that other states laid the groundwork and there is a body of best practices in the country. It is also due to the fact that nonprofit and local government entities with deep expertise in solar are willing to collaborate with state government, providing technical, communications, education, and programmatic expertise essential in the launch of any new statewide program.

These stakeholders have really stepped up in recent months in response to the drastic changes in the federal solar tax credits. Schools now have to begin construction of their

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solar systems by July 2026, or complete the project by the end of 2027 to qualify for the federal tax credits. While this is doable, it is ambitious and requires “all hands-on deck” to get the projects moving.

Governor Shapiro is so impressed with the success of Solar For Schools thus far that he included an additional $25 million in his budget proposal for next year! As of this writing, the state has yet to pass a budget.

Solar 4 Schools programs have so many winners: schools, students, taxpayers, and of course the environment, it should become a standard across the country.

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