

Rockdale school powered by solar energy

Teacher earns grants to boost science, technology education

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By FELIX SARVER - fsarver@shawmedia.com

ROCKDALE – Solar power has come to Rockdale Elementary School.

In August, school staff added 1.8-kilowatt solar panels to the roof to reduce electricity consumption with clean, renewable energy fuel that is free, courtesy of the sun.

Purchase and installation of the solar panels were made possible by grants totaling \$10,000 to power not only the school, but the students' science and technology education.

“This is kind of a stepping stone to not only learning through books but having [the solar panels] up on the roof collecting data. The kids are going to compare information with other schools and look at practical applications,” said Matt Olson, a Rockdale teacher who secured the grants.

Over the summer, [the school](#) was awarded \$7,000 from the [Clean Energy Community Foundation](#) and \$3,000 from [EcoLab’s Visions For Learning](#) to install the solar panel system. Olson said the school is in the process of adding wind turbines to the panels next spring after applying for grants.

Since the program’s launch in 2006, the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation has awarded \$2.6 million in grants to 280 schools to support the installation of the one kilowatt solar photovoltaic systems, school officials said.

The foundation was established in 1999 with a \$225 million endowment provided by ComEd. The foundation invests in clean energy development and land preservation efforts, working with communities and residents to improve environmental quality statewide, [according to its website](#).

The solar panel system provides immediate data on the electricity generated so students can log onto the Illinois Solar School website and analyze it, school officials said. The elementary school is now part of the [Illinois Solar Schools](#) program.

“We’re just really excited that we got funding now,” Principal Tammy Hafner said. “We want to explore STEM learning, especially with middle-schoolers.”

She said Olson has been key in applying for grants since he became an elementary and middle school science teacher last year.

“He’s been amazing, he is very visionary. ... He has the vision and the drive and he is the one going out to find different sources,” Hafner said.