

# Roth: Sunny opportunity for Oklahoma schools?

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According to the Oklahoma Policy Institute and other reputable observers, "Oklahoma had the dubious honor of having made the deepest cuts to school funding in the nation since the start of the recession in 2008. Now an update from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities shows that our lead has widened. Adjusted for inflation, Oklahoma's per student school formula funding has dropped 23.6 percent over the past six years, significantly more than in any other state."

And that observation was in late 2014. As of 2016, on average Oklahoma continues to spend at the rate that maintains our ranking as 48th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

And as we know today our state's budget dilemmas have only worsened in 2015 and 2016, with historic funding cuts further affecting investments in our public schools, our teachers and ultimately our young citizen students.

But rather than focusing on the budget appropriation side of schools' economics, I want to share an idea with our state leaders that might actually be a win-win for schools by creating real budget relief in the form of lowering their costs of operations and creating an income opportunity.

Here's how: Oklahoma's 1,784 public school buildings spend a great deal of money to provide electricity for heating and cooling throughout the school year, and this growing expense in each school's annual budget is often regarded as a mandatory expense without options. But that's not true; Oklahoma does have options.

Imagine the installation of solar panels on top of many of these more than 1,000 school buildings all across the state, generating more electricity than the school itself needs and exporting that excess power to the grid, every month of the year and actually creating more income back to the school than the solar systems cost. Yes, income. How's that for running government like a business?

It's happening all across America already, as solar energy is booming in America, with installations in 2016 expected to double the amount from record-breaking 2015 and a trend line toward 20 gigawatts annually by 2020. The cost to install solar has dropped by more than 70 percent over the last 10 years, leading the industry to expand into new markets and deploy thousands of systems nationwide, including with many

business and schools.

According to a recent report by the Solar Foundation and the Solar Energy Industries Association, there are nearly 4,000 K-12 schools in the United States with active solar systems, meaning more than 2.7 million American students attend solar schools. The report also found that thousands of other schools could save money by going solar. The large, flat rooftops typically found on public and private K-12 school buildings throughout Oklahoma make these buildings ideal for rooftop solar photovoltaic or solar thermal systems.

Parking lots and solar canopies are another obvious opportunity for Oklahoma schools to generate power, even more than their own buildings require, and the beauty of solar power is that the systems are generating energy at the most expensive time of the day. If you want to teach students something smart and observable every day outside of a textbook or a web page, schools can instruct students by doing something so obvious and observable to them every day.

Oklahoma is home to only one current solar installation at a public school, in the Tulsa area, yet there is enormous potential for school districts of all sizes all across the state. Our Legislature and our governor will need to agree with this idea and make slight changes to Oklahoma law to unlock this opportunity for our many cash-strapped public schools.

The utilities may fight it, as they've shown an intention so far to work against citizens who want to install and afford solar, but the Oklahoma taxpayer will love it. And after all, public officials take an oath to serve the citizens and this sunny opportunity is a great way to bring funding relief to our schools.

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