

Roth: Energy industry provides help for public schools

By [Jim Roth](#), Director and Chair of the Firm's Clean Energy Practice Group. This column was [originally published in The Journal Record](#) on August 14, 2017.



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School bells begin to ring across the state this month amid severe budget shortfalls. But there is hope yet, as schoolchildren receive inspiration, edification, and subsidization from the energy industry.

Back in 2011, Gov. Mary Fallin's Oklahoma First Energy Plan

listed a number of challenges faced by schools in the state. Among them: K-12 math and science programs are failing to inspire or prepare students to pursue science, technology, engineering, and mathematical careers; and classrooms are growing, but education resources have been strained to keep up in a tight budget environment. And as you probably know, state-level education funding has even been strained much harder since then.

But thankfully, local support remains strong for education and so too do local resources in many areas of the state, thanks to local investments like Oklahoma's wind energy industry. Data commissioned by the State Chamber reported, "[i]mportantly, the increased revenue provided to school districts containing wind energy projects benefits not only those districts, but districts across the state as well. The calculation of state aid to local school districts takes into account a number of the district's revenue sources. If, after those sources are tallied, the district's projected per-pupil revenue exceeds 150 percent of the projected state average per pupil revenue, the amount of state aid supplied to that district is reduced proportionately. This means more state funds are available for the support of all Oklahoma schools."

Put another, more direct way, when a wind project is located in a rural part of Oklahoma, that massive investment allows those schools to get an increase in local funding, which in turn reduces their need for state funding, which can then help those districts where wind energy projects aren't located. A win-win.

In Minco ad valorem tax revenue paid by local wind developers helped provide for a new high school. It also makes up about 10 percent of the school's budget. Even more recently, Okarche was able to construct a new gym, elementary school and agriculture and technology building, rather than deciding between those projects.

Oklahoma has enormous potential for another infusion of local investment benefiting local schools, in the form of solar energy. Solar panels on schools are becoming increasingly popular and affordable. Across the country school solar projects continue to pop up and offer not only reduced energy bills, but serve as unique teaching tools that inspire the next generation of inventors, scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs, and so on. Additionally, the projects have data collection systems which provide teachers with innovative lesson plans and students with interesting data to analyze.

Other Oklahoma energy industry leaders in the state offer direct support to schools, too.

Oil and gas producers not only pay business personal ad valorem taxes at the local level, industry leaders like Devon, Chesapeake, and OG&E provide cash and educational programs directly to schools.

One interesting project is Devon's Science Giants grant, which delivers resources to educators who have applied with an idea to help spark students' interest in science, technology, and engineering. These types of company engagements and generosity are fueling and inspiring Oklahoma's young minds. And we should be grateful for it.

Oklahoma's diverse energy landscape can benefit so many. From solar panels on schools, to natural gas-powered school buses, to significant local revenue from wind farms, my hope is that our energy leaders will continue to educate, support, and inspire our youth at the local level, and that our energy horizon continues to broaden for every Oklahoman's sake.

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