

Small-town students powered by clean-energy project

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Hardhats and safety harnesses are the latest in spring fashion wear at Elliot Lake Secondary School. Students don the gear while climbing the school roof, where 12 solar panels and a vertical wind turbine are being installed.

The project, which will generate 5.5 kW of renewable energy, was made possible with a \$50,000 grant from the Ontario Ministry of Energy's Community Conservation Initiative (CCI) along with additional help from local partners. It's a rare, hands-on learning opportunity in clean energy for students that also helps power the school's cafeteria's kitchen.

The school of 500 sits near the centre of town, surrounded by forested lots of small-town suburbia. Adjacent to the ELSS parking lot, a hump of bare Canadian Shield marked by 50 years of graffiti looms as a reminder that this is hard country.

For a half a century, Elliot Lake, Ont., a town built for mining, was a major source of uranium for the burgeoning atomic energy markets in the U.S. and Canada. When the supply of easily accessible uranium dwindled in the 90s, that and an increasingly volatile market, brought operations to a close and ushered mass unemployment into the town of 12,000.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Peter Hauguth and Evelyn Vegeris, students at Elliot Lake Secondary School in Elliot lake, Ont., do some light repairs on solar panels attached to their school.



However, Elliot Lake bounced back, not only reinvented itself as a picturesque retirement community but again gaining attention for the energy it is producing. This time, though, the energy is green.

PSSST. YOU WANNA BUY SOME GREEN ENERGY?

Social Science teacher Lindsay Killen, acting on a tip from Principal Mark Robinson, got the ball rolling with an application for funding to the CCI.

“It took about five months to finalize, including the formation of a committee and the tendering of contracts and logistics,” says Mr. Killen, who has taught at the school for twenty years.

But Mr. Killan is quick to deflect credit, citing the members of the school's Environmental Issues Club as his inspiration and the real movers behind the project.

The students and teachers have been working with two companies, Sunvolts Solar from Parry Sound and Cleanfield Energy from Ancaster, Ont., to install the equipment.

Involvement in the project has provided an understanding not easily produced in the classroom. In the end, the students have the satisfaction in knowing they have contributed to a technological and economic change as well as developing mechanical and communication skills needed to perpetuate the transformation.

GENERATION LOOKS AHEAD

Renewable energy is just one way students at this northern school are making a difference. For example, Grade 11 student Evelyn Vegeris is a regular contributor to the local radio station where she advocates for an expanded recycling program and encourages conservation.

“My first goal is to get the city of Elliot Lake to recycle as much as possible, which is already happening,” says Ms. Vegeris. “I worry that all the waste is just building up. Even though we have Earth Day, people kind of forget.”

As part of their community outreach efforts, the Environmental Issues Club and the communications class are putting together an environmentally focused podcast that will be available from the school's website.

Access to green technologies and computer-assisted communications is inspiring a quiet revolution among young people. While today's students are poised to inherit the fallout from two centuries of industrial activity, they are also equipped with what at times seems a preternatural understanding of new technology and its potential to address environmental issues.

Paul Hauguth, a twelfth grade student who participated in the project, believes such direct action will be necessary in the coming years.

“As a society we have bad habits. It's not our fault, it's just the way we grew up,” says Mr. Hauguth. “We have to try to wean ourselves out of bad habits, to get people away from wasting.”

And like many of his peers, Mr. Hauguth believes technology could be the answer to some of the problems facing the planet.

“I see excellent advances. Think of how far our technology has come in 100 years, from the locomotive to where we are, and how far we can go with green technology,” says Mr. Hauguth. “We have largely depended on nonrenewable resources, and taken the earth for granted. But if we can't live in the environment we won't be able to live at all.”

THE IDEA IS SPREADING

Ripples from the project have already spread throughout the region. Lindsay Killen says four other high schools in Northern Ontario, including a school in Sudbury 160 kilometers away, have contacted him for advice on how they can offset some of their lighting and heating costs while providing a valuable teaching opportunity for their students.

And, recently, the school has been named runner up in The Green Team Challenge from the 2008 Canadian Environmental Awards and Canadian Geographic.

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