

Students have also been involved with a bio diesel project to power school buses. They collect cooking grease from local restaurants and at one time even grew canola in local fields that they harvested and turned into oil. Currently the agriculture class is using an unused bathroom to grow lettuce with the use of fish tanks and special lighting, making it a continuous-flow solution hydroponic project.

An emphasis on watching the clock

More practical habits were also implemented. Welding class was rescheduled so it never was held between 11 a.m.-1 p.m. when peak (higher electric) rates were in effect. And washing athletic uniforms takes place after hours when rates are even lower.

Again their theme comes through, turning little things into big things. Jones even monitored the lights in the school's parking lot. "These lights were 4-5 percent of our entire electric bill. We changed the timing of when they come on and shut off. The savings were not huge, but consistent," Jones said.

Solar gets another chance

Since 2010, the Stanley-Boyd School District has reduced its overall electric use by 27 percent. That adds up to 348,000 kilowatt hours, roughly the amount to power 35 homes for a year. Once again they decided to explore solar. However, estimates to create their own solar array were around \$80,000. Plus, there would be construction worries and ongoing maintenance costs. Jones said, "We realized solar was not a do-it-yourself project for a school district."

In early 2016, the Solar*Connect Community program presented a new and attractive opportunity that only required \$18,000. Jones added, "And since we are buying into a project run by our utility, Xcel Energy, it was a partnership with real legitimacy. And the school board agreed."

The school district will start with a commitment to 10 kW of solar power delivered via the Solar*Connect Community program. Each month a \$74 credit is awarded for the 25-year contract and that may go up but cannot go down. At the very least, the district will be credited \$22,075 for a cost of \$17,800.

Added benefit: more learning opportunities

The school is looking to make education enrichment part of this solar equation. Sixth graders will be incorporated into the plan by visiting the solar community site and having long-term assignments around the solar effort. There's math, physics, weather and earth science involved, but there's also writing, social studies and government lessons that will be covered.

Learn more at xcelenergy.com/SolarConnectCommunity.