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VIEWPOINT

Quotation for today
Get mad, then get over it.

Colin P.

Solar project serves as teaching tool

Students at Northwest Pennsylvania Collegiate Academy are getting a hands-on education about how to conserve energy, save money and help the environment.

On Monday, students from Collegiate's Green Team took part in a ribbon-cutting ceremony for new solar panels that were installed on the school's roof. Using solar energy is expected to cut the school's electric bill by 1 percent.

Between March 2007 and January 2009, the Green Team already saved the school \$16,526.48 and conserved 214,580 kilowatt hours. Under the leadership of environmental science teacher Doreen Petri, students conducted an extensive energy audit at the 80-year-old school, 2825 State Street. "Student-recommended changes as simple as turning off unnecessary lights and increasing natural lighting were instituted without spending any money," says Petri.

A \$112,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection paid for the solar panels and installation. DEP was impressed

OURVIEW

that the Green Team "had done its homework," according to Kelly Burch, regional director.

Some critics have questioned the wisdom of using solar energy in Erie.

Their skepticism might be understandable, because we all like to gripe when the sun disappears for long stretches at this time of year. But their complaints miss the real lessons from this project.

Putting solar energy to work as a teaching tool is a great way to engage students in science and technology issues. As Americans grapple with long-term ways to conserve energy and short-term challenges to tighten our belts, it's encouraging that young people are discovering practical ways to apply classroom knowledge to real-life problems. Students are learning that it's possible to extract

energy from UV rays to generate power even in cloudy northwestern Pennsylvania.

Students also have gotten a lesson about how to be good stewards of tax dollars. Because of their energy audits, Collegiate squeezed about \$4,000 a year from its electric bill. Student-led energy audits will also be used at other Erie city schools.

The Green Team is influencing adults, too, because as Petri said, "Our goal is to break old habits and form new ones. And adults really listen to children when they talk about saving the environment. We have presented our conservation project many times and the response has been overwhelming."

Because of various incentives, private citizens are also investing in solar energy. Dave Skellie of Pennsylvania Sea Grant installed solar panels on his home and is pleased with the results. "It was a happy moment when I realized the meter was spinning backward. That means we're producing more energy than we are using and the electric company issues us a credit," Skellie said.

It's hard to argue with that payback.