

Published in the 2002 *Ashland Area Magazine*,  
a publication of the Ashland Alliance Chamber of Commerce,  
published by Lanham Media Services

## Plugging into the Sun

by Kay Steele Faulk

Ashland Independent School District's Paul G. Blazer High School and Greenup County School System's Wurtland Elementary are two of only seventy schools in the nation with solar electricity systems. These systems were acquired as part of Learning from Light!, an environmental education program begun by American Electric Power (AEP) in partnership with the Foundation for Environmental Education. Endorsed by the U.S. Department of Energy, Learning from Light! fits under the DOE's Million Solar Roofs program, which aims to have one million solar roofs installed in the U.S. by 2010.

When industrial arts instructor Randy Heaberlin began his teaching career 23 years ago at Paul G. Blazer High School in Ashland, installing and wiring a solar electricity system with his students was not a project he dared dream of. Nor did Sheila Reeder, Superintendent of Greenup County School System, ever think solar power for one of her schools would become a reality.

Nevertheless, in June 2001, Superintendent Reeder and Wurtland Elementary's 316 students, along with parents, teachers and community leaders, dedicated the first Million Solar Roofs project in Kentucky. "We want this system to help Wurtland students make a connection between what they learn in the classroom and real life. We also want it to help them become informed citizens regarding environmental issues," Reeder said.

Calling the system "an invaluable learning resource for the school and the community," AEP Kentucky State President Timothy Mosher stated, "It's a springboard

for understanding renewable energy and energy management and usage and why it's important for a school's energy supplier to be able to use a variety of fuels to generate electricity." To further aid student learning, AEP provides a Web site for students at [www.aep.com/environmental/renewables/solar/](http://www.aep.com/environmental/renewables/solar/).

Assisting on the solar energy project was retired Greenup County physics teacher Don Liles, who commended Superintendent Reeder for being "very open to new ideas that cause students to extend themselves intellectually." Liles added, "By participating in Learning from Light!, we hope to instill the concept that there are alternative sources of fuel out there but they need to be developed. We want the children to look at that solar panel and think to themselves—as Henry Ford did when seeing his first car—*I can build a better one.*"

Meanwhile, over at the 1,050-student Paul G. Blazer High School, Randy Heaberlin and members of the school's Technology Education Department were hard at work qualifying their school for the Million Solar Roofs program and raising the \$7,600 needed for the system. Crediting the Ashland Independent School Board with getting behind the project 100%, the industrial arts teacher commented, "When a teacher can justify a need, this school board will find a way to do it." Donations from AEP, Parsley Sign Company and Third Sun Renewable Energy helped to get the installation at Paul Blazer underway.

Heaberlin was able to use both the installation and wiring of the system as a hands-on application of classroom instruction for his students, who are seen



at left assembling the solar panel framework under the watchful eye of a skilled professional from Third Sun Renewable Energy. At right, other students carefully assemble the system's interior electrical components. What satisfaction and pride these students must take in knowing their handiwork helps to power their school's buildings and equipment!

It's no wonder that when the big day came in May 2002 for the solar project's dedication, state lawmakers commended the Ashland Independent School District and teacher Randy Heaberlin for enhancing learning. At the ceremony, Heaberlin and the Technology Education Department were honored with Senate and House citations for bringing the project to fruition. Joining the lawmakers in recognizing the industrial arts teacher, AEP State President Mosher said, "We're thrilled that Mr. Heaberlin was able to use the installation itself as a teaching tool."

When interviewed, Heaberlin expressed sentiments similar to those of Greenup County's Sheila Reeder and Don Liles. "These students are our engineers and scientists of tomorrow. Who knows which of them may someday head a scientific team responsible for something as important as making environmentally friendly fuel cells an affordable alternative to the gasoline engine? Who knows the contributions *any* of them might make to our world because their imagination was tapped by the solar panel at this school?"

For now, however, one thing is certain—*everyone* will benefit from seeing the good that can come when progressive school systems, state and federal government, community organizations and private enterprise get together on education.<sup>†</sup>

---

<sup>†</sup> Organizations collaborating on the Learning from Light! program at Wurtland Elementary and Paul G. Blazer High School included American Electric Power, Greenup County School District, Ashland Independent School District, Kentucky Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Cabinet, Kentucky Division of Energy, U.S. Department of Energy, the Foundation for Environmental Education, KY NEED, Parsley Sign Company and Third Sun Renewable Energy.