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October 29, 2014

Megan Zalaski holds up a pair of scissors after cutting the ribbon to the school's new solar array Friday at McDougle Middle School.

McDougle lets the sunshine in

School 1st in district to get solar panels

By Jonathan M. Alexander
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CARRBORO Megan Zalaski looked into the crowd nervously, as she held a huge pair of scissors – half her body size – ready to cut the big blue ribbon.

With cameras snapping, and her McDougle Middle School classmates and principals cheering, she held the scissors steady and snipped, cutting the ribbon to the school's new solar panels.

School board members, town, county and district leaders all came to watch Friday's ceremony. The solar panels are the first of their kind in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools district.

"It's the beginning process of getting schools to produce clean energy and not just clean thinking and healthy students," said Dan Schnitzer, sustainable energy coordinator for the district.

Solar panels convert energy from the sun into electricity. When the sun's rays hit the panels, the thermal energy knocks electrons in the panel's silicon layers into metal conductors. The movement of the electrons creates the flow of electricity, helping to power the school.

Rob Pinder of Solarize Carrboro, approached Schnitzer and Principal Debra Scott a year ago. The idea was to not just talk about the importance

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Right for solar?

Solar works best on structures facing south, southwest, and southeast. There should be little or no shading from trees, buildings, chimneys or roof gables. Your roof should be in good condition.

To estimate how much solar power is available at your home, a good rule of thumb is that 100 sq. ft. are needed for 1 kW capacity panel, that for North Carolina conditions, will generate between 1,000 -- 1,500 kWh per year.

Questions? Contact info@solarizenc.org

Source: Solarize Orange County

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of clean air and alternative energy, but to make it happen.

"This is a real life application of what they are learning," Scott said. "That's what we do in just about all classes. We try to tie it to something that is meaningful to the students and (apply) what they're learning to their lives."

The students raised $8,000 for the solar panels, some coming from a baking sale, some from community donors. Even the eighth graders from the previous year donated money.

Schnitzer said the distirct plans to install solar panels at all schools. The Solarize Chapel Hill project will set aside money from every installation to eventually raise money to do that, he said.

"It's a win-win. We'll get more people interested in solarized movements," Schnitzer said. "And our students win. They get learning opportunities. And they get clean energy in their schools."

According to the district, in a year, the instillation will generate 1,400 kilowatt-hours of electricity for the school. That is enough electricity to power a refrigerator for two years, or a home for two months. Each year the instillation will also avoid having to burn 1,000 pounds of coal and will prevent one ton of greenhouse gas emissions.

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