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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - MR02**

From: Karen Tigani, Director of Education

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## YOUTH BELONGING AND ENGAGEMENT EVENT

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### Youth Voices Illuminate Stratford's Future at "Your City. Your Future" Engagement Event

*Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board students join Stratford leaders in conversations about civic life and community vision.*

**Stratford, ON** — Grade 10 students from St. Michael Catholic Secondary School joined Stratford youth at the Rotary Community Hall on Thursday, October 2 for *Your City. Your Future*—the City of Stratford's first-ever youth engagement event. This unique gathering brought together young people from both secondary schools, local leaders, civic staff, community organizations, and businesses to explore Stratford's present realities and imagine its shared future.

Hosted by Mayor Martin Ritsma, City of Stratford staff, and in partnership with local schools, this was no ordinary career fair. The event created a vibrant space for meaningful dialogue, bold questions, and shared dreaming between generations. Its central purpose was to create opportunities for listening, reflection, and collaboration so that young people could see themselves as vital contributors to their community's future.

#### Engagement through Community and Conversation

Students explored two interactive learning "pods" throughout the day, as follows:

- **Community Engagement Pod:** More than fifty local organizations, businesses, and civic departments hosted booths where students could ask questions, learn about opportunities, and make connections. Many generously donated door prizes for the youth participants.
- **Youth Voice Pod:** Students participated in small group conversations with civic leaders, responding to reflective prompts about their experiences growing up in Stratford and

surrounding areas. A large “graffiti wall” collected hundreds of imaginative ideas and innovative dreams for Stratford’s future—tangible evidence of the students’ creativity and care for their community.

## **A Spirit of Hope and Participation**

The response from St. Michael CSS students and community partners were overwhelmingly positive. Many students shared their appreciation for being included in thoughtful conversations about their city. For example:

Brooke Hahn noted, *“I like that they wanted to hear what we had to say and what we thought. It was good to get ideas about where I could go in the future.”*

Pearl Patterson, reflected on the structure and purpose of the day, saying, *“It was well organized. I think it’s cool that they value our voices. It’s unique that our city is asking for teens’ opinions.”*

Caleb Pennings added, *“I liked being able to talk to different groups of people that work in Stratford.”*

## **Partnerships that Reflect Shared Values**

The Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board was proud to support this important community initiative by the City of Stratford and Mayor Ritsma. We believe that forming engaged citizens means nurturing students who see themselves as active participants in building a just, caring, and hopeful society. This event reflected the Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations in action, as students demonstrated critical thinking, effective communication, and a commitment to their communities. It also reflects our multi-year strategic plan which includes a goal to engage students with community, charitable and service organizations.

## **Looking Ahead**

The Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board believes that youth voices must be honoured, and we share in the hope that meaningful events like this will continue to be planned into the future. Through experiences such as these, students grow in their awareness of their gifts, their responsibilities as citizens, and their ability to shape their communities for the common good.

The Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations provide a guiding framework for this growth, helping students to become discerning believers, effective communicators, responsible citizens, and collaborative contributors—individuals who recognize their capacity to make a difference in the world around them.

We share the hope that this event will be the beginning of an ongoing collaboration—an annual opportunity for Stratford’s youth and community leaders to connect, dream, and build the city’s future together.





Photo Reference: Superintendent of Education Sean McDade, Teacher Lauren Coughlin, Mayor Ritsma, Director of Education Karen Tigani and five St. Michael Catholic SS students

References: City of Stratford Press Release on 2025-10-03

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