



2025

**WESTLOCK STUDENT
SURVEY REPORT**

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INTRODUCTION

The Town of Westlock is developing a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) – a forward-looking plan to guide the community’s economic growth, resilience, and prosperity over the next five years. A CEDS is a widely used planning tool that helps municipalities **assess current conditions, identify strengths and challenges, engage stakeholders, and develop an evidence-based strategy with measurable goals**. Simply put, a CEDS is a **strategy-driven blueprint for local and regional economic development**. It provides a vehicle for individuals, organizations, local government, and businesses to engage in meaningful conversation about building capacity and prosperity in the community. **Broad community engagement** is a cornerstone of the CEDS process – local residents, businesses, community groups, and even students are invited to participate through surveys, interviews, and workshops. Engaging youth is particularly important: young people will inherit the community’s future, so their perspectives need to be heard in order to shape a strategy that addresses their needs and aspirations. By involving students in the planning process, Westlock’s CEDS aims to ensure the final strategy reflects the **ideas and priorities of its next generation** – helping to attract and retain youth as part of the town’s long-term economic and community development.

This report presents a comprehensive analysis of the **Westlock Student Survey** results (n = 124) conducted as part of the CEDS community engagement. The findings are organized into four sections reflecting the survey structure: **ABOUT YOU, LOOKING AHEAD: YOUR FUTURE, WESTLOCK: YOUR COMMUNITY, and PLANNING YOUR FUTURE**. Each section summarizes key statistics for every question, highlights major insights (including some comparisons by grade and school), and provides visualizations for select results to facilitate understanding. Summary tables and charts are included to illustrate important data points (such as grade/school distributions, community ratings, and plans to stay or leave), and comparisons across groups are noted where relevant. Together, these insights from Westlock’s youth will inform the CEDS and help local leaders craft policies that align with young residents’ needs and hopes for the future.

KEY FINDINGS

The following themes summarize what Westlock's Grade 11 and 12 students shared through the 2025 Student Survey. These insights offer a direct window into youth perceptions, priorities, and plans—and can guide future economic, social, and community strategies. While the outlook is cautiously optimistic, the findings highlight both opportunities and challenges for engaging and retaining young people in Westlock's future.

YOUTH OUTLOOK IS CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC

Most students feel neutral or slightly positive about their personal future. The median optimism score was 0 on a scale from -5 to +5. More than half of students gave positive scores, while only a small group rated their outlook as negative. The most common responses were +3 and +5, chosen by 21 and 19 students respectively. Grade 12 students tended to feel slightly more optimistic than Grade 11s.

MOST STUDENTS EXPECT TO LEAVE WESTLOCK

Sixty-two percent of students said they do not plan to stay in Westlock after high school. Nearly one-third were unsure, and fewer than one in ten said they plan to stay. Interest in returning to Westlock as a future option was low, with an average score of 3.5 out of 10. These results show that while Westlock is home for many, few students see it as part of their long-term future.

WESTLOCK IS FAMILIAR BUT LACKS ENGAGEMENT FOR YOUTH

Students gave Westlock an average rating of 4.8 out of 10 as a place to live. Many students appreciate the town's friendly atmosphere and close-knit environment. They especially value the Spirit Centre and its central role in the community. However, students repeatedly said there is little for them to do. They also mentioned poor road conditions, limited dining or shopping options, and concerns around social issues.

FUTURE PLANS ARE PRACTICAL AND FOCUSED

Nearly 70 percent of students plan to pursue post-secondary education. About one-fifth are undecided. The most popular career interests include outdoor and recreation work, technology and trades, and health and service roles. Students said their choices are driven by practical goals. Income and job security matter most, followed by personal interest and a desire to help others.

STUDENTS WANT MORE OPPORTUNITIES AND A STRONGER VOICE

Students expressed a clear desire for more youth-focused spaces and events. Many want a dedicated youth hub, better restaurants, or even a small movie theatre. Some suggested more co-op jobs and support for small business or creative entrepreneurship. They want life-skills education like budgeting and taxes to be available in school. Several said they wish youth had more input in how the town is run and planned.



ABOUT YOU

CHAPTER 1

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

This chapter captures the **demographic profile** of the student respondents, including their grade (as a proxy for age), length of time in Westlock, and school attended. Understanding who took the survey provides context for interpreting the results, as different groups of students (by age or school) sometimes responded differently.

➤ **Grade (Age Grouping):** The vast majority of respondents were in **Grade 11** (74 students, ~60%) or **Grade 12** (47 students, ~38%), with only a small remainder (3 students, ~2%) preferring not to state their grade. *Figure 1* visualizes this grade distribution: clearly, Grade 11 students form the largest cohort of participants, followed by Grade 12, with virtually no younger students involved. This slight skew toward Grade 11 (as 11th graders outnumber 12th graders in the sample) will be kept in mind during analysis. Notably, Grade 12 students comprised a slightly smaller share of the sample, but their responses sometimes differed from Grade 11s (as noted in later insights).

➤ **Time in Westlock:** Students were generally long-time members of the community. When asked how long they have lived or attended school in Westlock, **40%** of respondents indicated “**11+ years**” (essentially their whole lives in Westlock), and an additional **17%** have **6–10 years** in Westlock. About **24%** have been in Westlock **2–5 years**, and **15%** are relatively new (only **0–2 years** in the community). Only a handful (~3%) chose

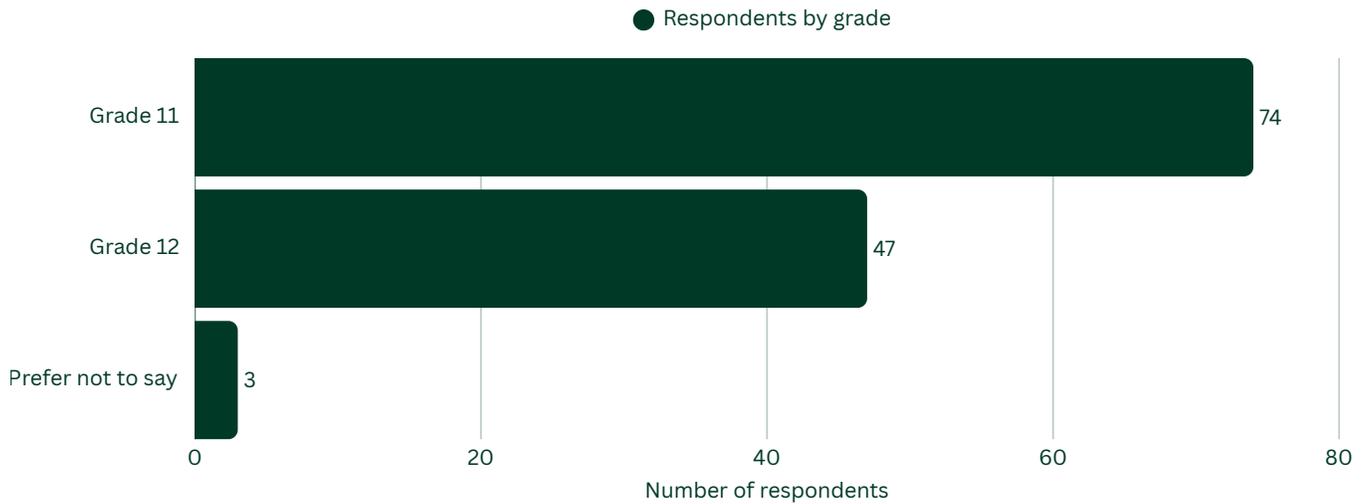
“Other,” suggesting unusual circumstances (e.g. living elsewhere currently or split residency).

Insight: The majority of respondents (over half) have **grown up in Westlock**, which may influence their perspectives on the community and future (having deep roots, family ties, and long familiarity), in contrast to those newer to town who might have different viewpoints or fewer attachments.

➤ **School Attended:** Respondents were drawn from Westlock’s two high schools. Approximately **81%** attend **R.F. Staples Secondary School** (the public high school) and about **19%** attend **St. Mary Catholic School**, with none indicating “Other” as their school. *Figure 2* shows the survey count by school: out of 124 students, 100 are from R.F. Staples and 24 from St. Mary. This roughly corresponds to the schools’ enrollment sizes, though the public school is more heavily represented in the sample. Where relevant, differences between the two schools’ responses are noted – for example, St. Mary students tended to rate Westlock **slightly more favorably** as a place to live (average rating ~5.7/10) than did R.F. Staples students (avg ~4.6/10). However, neither group had many students planning to remain in Westlock after graduation (as discussed later), and in fact **none of the St. Mary’s respondents said they definitively plan to stay** in town after high school.

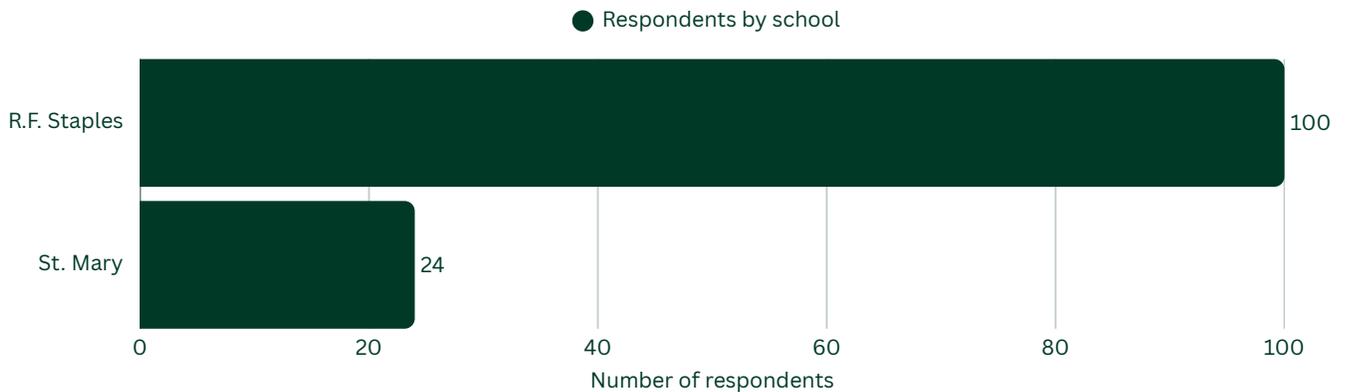
CHAPTER 1: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY GRADE



NOTE: Distribution of survey respondents by grade (n=124). Grade 11 students made up about 60% of respondents, Grade 12 about 38%, with ~2% not stating a grade. Each bar shows the number of students in that grade who participated in the survey. As shown, the survey primarily captured the views of Grade 11 and 12 students, with very few younger students responding.

FIGURE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY SCHOOL



NOTE: Distribution of survey respondents by school. Out of 124 students, 100 (81%) attend R.F. Staples Secondary (public school) and 24 (19%) attend St. Mary Catholic School. No respondents selected any other school. This imbalance reflects the larger size of the public high school. Despite some small differences in responses between the two schools (e.g., in community ratings), students from both schools share many similar concerns and outlooks about Westlock.

A young man with short, curly hair, wearing a dark blue t-shirt and a dark green backpack with brown leather accents, stands by a large window. He is looking out the window with a thoughtful expression. The window shows a bright, sunny outdoor scene with trees and a building. The image is framed by a dark green border at the top and bottom.

**LOOKING AHEAD:
YOUR FUTURE**

CHAPTER 2

OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE

In this section, students reflected on their **feelings about the future** – including their optimism or pessimism, concerns, sense of preparedness, and awareness of trends shaping their lives. It also explores what excites or worries them about the future, and what knowledge or skills they feel they need for the road ahead. These questions help gauge the mindset of Westlock youth as they stand on the brink of adulthood.

➤ **Overall Optimism about the Future:** On balance, Westlock youth feel cautiously optimistic about their personal futures. When asked *“Overall, how optimistic or pessimistic do you feel about the future?”* on a scale from very pessimistic to very optimistic (–5 to +5), most students clustered around the middle or slightly positive. The median response was **0** (neutral), and over half (~**56%**) rated themselves on the **optimistic** side (above neutral), whereas about a quarter were **pessimistic** (below neutral). In fact, the single most common rating was “0” (neutral) – chosen by 35 students – but a significant number chose moderately positive values (e.g. +3 by 21 students and +5 by 19 students). Only a small minority (roughly 5–10%) selected the most extreme pessimistic values (*Figure 3*).

➤ **Grade 12 vs. Grade 11:** Notably, **Grade 12** students were **more optimistic on average** than Grade 11 students. **Two-thirds** of Grade

12s had a positive outlook, with only ~**8%** pessimistic, compared to less than half of Grade 11s being optimistic (and about **23%** of Grade 11s expressed pessimism). In other words, Grade 11s were more likely to feel unsure or negative. This may reflect growing confidence among seniors as they finalize post-graduation plans, whereas Grade 11s (with another year of uncertainty ahead) might feel more anxiety about the future. Despite these differences, it’s encouraging that a majority in both grades still lean hopeful rather than pessimistic about what’s to come.

➤ **Future Career Prospects:** Students were also asked *“How do you feel about your future career prospects?”*, rated on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 = “very good/excited”). Here the sentiment skewed **positive** – the average rating was about **7 out of 10**, and the most frequent response was the maximum “**10**,” chosen by 21 students. In fact, **60%** of respondents rated their career outlook a **7 or higher**, suggesting a generally upbeat view of their personal job or further-education prospects. However, a few outliers gave low ratings (around 8% gave a 3 or below). This indicates many students feel hopeful and excited about finding careers they want, even if some are still uncertain.

➤ **What Excites You about the Future:** Students’ open-ended answers to *“What most*

excites you about the future?” revealed a range of hopes and interests. Common themes included:

- **Personal Freedom & Life Changes:** Many students look forward to becoming adults and gaining independence – e.g. moving out, attending college, traveling, and generally *“starting life on their own terms.”* This sense of freedom and new experiences was frequently mentioned as exciting.
- **Career and Financial Success:** Several respondents expressed excitement about pursuing their dream careers or *“making good money”* in the future. For instance, some mentioned being eager to start businesses, join trades, or enter professions they are passionate about. Achieving financial stability and goals (buying a car or house, etc.) is a motivating vision for them.
- **Technological and Societal Progress:** A number of students are excited about future technological advancements and innovations. They anticipate new tech (and the possibilities it brings) as something to look forward to. Others mentioned looking forward to positive changes in society or *“the world improving”* in areas like equality or environmental protection.
- **Personal Growth:** Some students noted that simply *becoming the person they want to be* excites them – growing wiser, meeting new people, and improving themselves over time. The journey of personal development is seen as an exciting part of their future.

On the other hand, a few students admitted they *“aren’t sure”* what to be excited about – reflecting uncertainty or ambivalence about the future. Overall, though, most could identify at least one thing that gives them optimism, whether it’s personal aspirations or broader changes in the world.

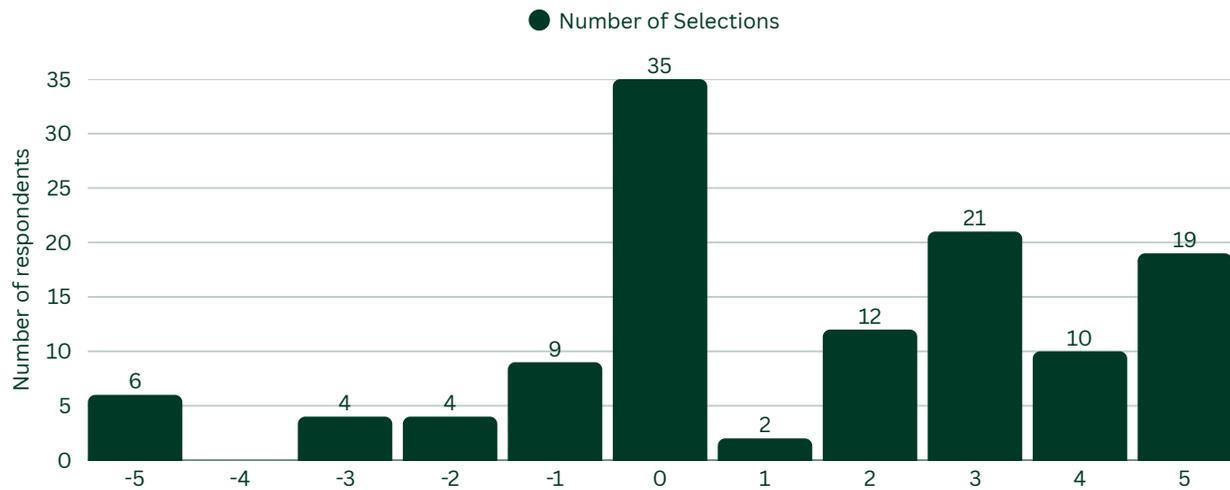
What Concerns You about the Future:

When asked *“What most concerns or worries you about the future?”*, students were very candid. The dominant concern, mentioned by a large portion of respondents, was **economic insecurity** – specifically, the **cost of living** and financial stability. Many students worry about being able to afford housing, education, or “making ends meet” as adults. Comments about “having enough money” or debt were prevalent. Other major concerns included:

- **Global/Societal Issues:** Climate change and environmental degradation were frequently cited fears – students worry about how climate shifts will impact their lives. Additionally, issues like war/conflict, political instability, and global pandemics surfaced as anxiety points (likely reflecting the turbulent events of recent years on the world stage).
- **Job Market Uncertainty:** Some are concerned about finding good jobs or *“the unpredictable job market.”* They fear a lack of opportunities in their desired fields or being unable to secure stable employment. This ties into the financial concern and also reflects worries about automation or heavy competition for jobs.

CHAPTER 2: OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE

FIGURE 3: OVERALL OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE



NOTE: Over half (52%) rated themselves on the optimistic side, while about 19% were pessimistic. The most common response was neutral (0), selected by 35 students, followed by moderately positive ratings such as +3 (21 students) and +5 (19 students). Only a small number of respondents selected the most extreme pessimistic values. These results indicate that most youth view their future with hope and positivity, though some uncertainty remains.

- **Personal Failure or Stress:** A number of youth admitted fears of failure – not achieving their goals or “messing up” in life. Others worried about mental health and stress, e.g. facing burnout, or not being happy with their future decisions. The pressure to succeed and make the right life choices weighs on some students.
- **Community and Safety:** A few expressed concerns about social issues like crime or drug use (locally and beyond), and whether the community/world will be safe and welcoming as they grow older. While not as commonly mentioned as other categories, it’s notable that some youths worry about the social environment they’ll live in.

In summary, **money and economic security** emerged as the top worry, followed by big-picture global issues and personal challenges. This suggests that while many are optimistic, they are not naïve about the **challenges ahead**. Practical concerns about finances and jobs loom large, alongside awareness of broader societal problems that could affect their generation.

CHAPTER 3

FUTURE AWARENESS

➤ **Preparedness for the Future:** Despite their concerns, most students feel at least somewhat prepared to face the future’s challenges. In response to *“Given the speed of change in the world and your own skills, how well prepared do you feel for the future?”* (rated -5 to +5 from not at all to very prepared), roughly **56%** felt **prepared** (positive values), **24%** felt **unprepared** (negative values), and **20%** neutral. Only a small fraction rated themselves extremely unprepared. The average rating was modestly positive. **Grade 12** students again showed more confidence – over **76%** of seniors felt prepared, vs only **~44%** of Grade 11 students feeling prepared. This likely reflects that Grade 12s have more training/experience under their belt (e.g. finishing high school, applying for college or jobs), whereas some Grade 11s haven’t solidified those future-ready skills yet. In general, however, most students believe they are adapting and will manage changes, even if about a quarter feel behind the curve in some areas.

➤ **“Future Awareness”:** Similarly, students rated *“How would you rate your current ‘future awareness’?”* – essentially, how aware/informed they are about trends and future possibilities (rated -5 to +5 from not aware at all to very aware). Here the self-assessment was relatively high: about **69%** consider themselves on the aware or knowledgeable side, **23%** neutral, and only **~8%** felt unaware. Many gave themselves

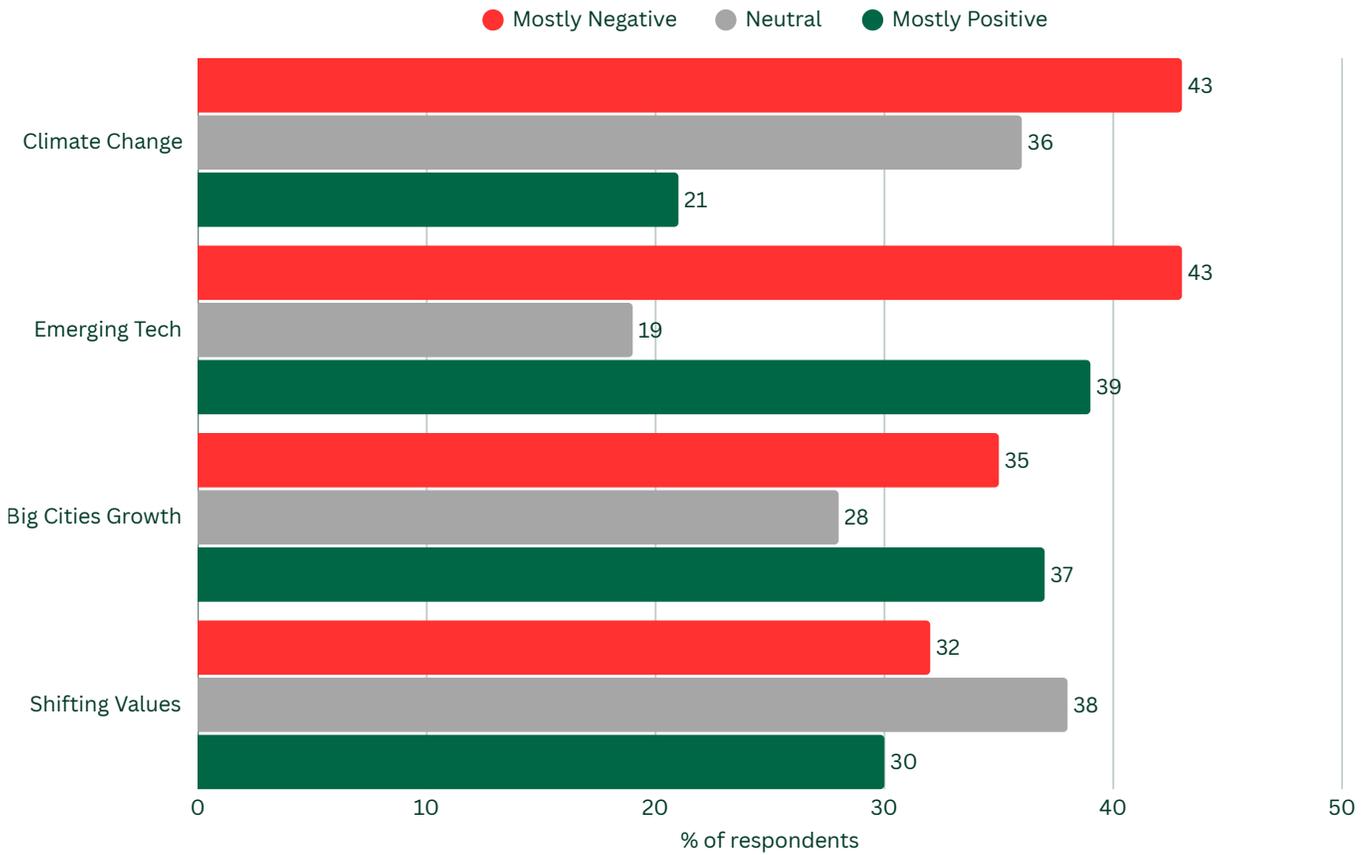
moderate positive scores, indicating they *try to stay informed* about the world. This suggests that Westlock youth are generally paying attention to current events and future trends (though there’s room to improve knowledge, as seen in the next question on knowledge needs). Notably, feeling more “future aware” correlated with feeling more prepared – students who seek out information tend to feel more ready to handle what’s coming. This underscores the value of education and information in boosting confidence.

➤ **Perceived Impact of Future Trends:** The survey listed several global trends – **Changing climatic patterns, Emerging technologies, Growth in big cities (like Edmonton), Shifting social values** – and asked, *“Do you think these trends will have a mostly positive or negative impact on your life and future prospects?”*. Students rated each on a scale (interpreted as 0 = very negative impact, 5 = neutral, 10 = very positive). The results show distinct attitudes toward each trend, summarized in *Figure 4* below. In the chart, each trend’s bar is segmented to show the percentage of respondents who feel it will impact them **negatively** (red), **neutrally** (gray), or **positively** (green). “Neutral” means they expect neither positive nor negative impact.

- **Climate Change:** This trend was viewed with significant concern. A plurality (about **43%**) see changing climate patterns as having a mostly **negative** impact on their future (e.g. threats to the environment, economy, and way of life), while **36%** were neutral and only **~20%** saw it as positive. Climate change drew the highest negativity of all listed trends, highlighting that many youth are worried about it (likely because they'll live with its effects the longest). Very few see climate change bringing personal benefits; most either fear its impact or are uncertain what it will mean for them.
- **Emerging Technologies:** Opinions on new technologies were **split**. While an equally large share (**~43%**) foresee negative impacts from emerging tech (perhaps due to job automation, privacy issues, or social disruption), a substantial group (**39%**) anticipates **positive** impacts (improvements in quality of life, new opportunities, advances in healthcare, etc.). About **19%** were neutral. This polarization suggests that students recognize technology's double-edged nature – some are excited by innovation and the doors it could open, while others fear consequences like job displacement or reduced human connection. Tech is both a source of hope and anxiety among youth.
- **Growth of Big Cities:** Students leaned slightly **positive** about the growth of large urban centres (such as nearby Edmonton). Around **37%** said big-city growth will positively impact their lives – possibly seeing more opportunities in big cities for jobs, education, and entertainment – whereas about **35%** predicted **negative** impacts (perhaps fearing that rural towns like Westlock will be “left behind” or lose people to the city), and **28%** were neutral. In other words, many see city growth as an **opportunity** (they might move or benefit from a thriving city economy), but a significant number worry it might draw resources and young people away from communities like Westlock. This reflects the classic urban-rural push-pull dynamic as these students consider their futures.
- **Shifting Social Values:** Students were the most **ambivalent** about this trend. A **majority (38%)** marked **neutral** – indicating uncertainty about whether changing social attitudes (regarding politics, culture, norms) will affect them. The rest were split: roughly **32%** expect **negative** impact (perhaps those who prefer traditional values or fear societal polarization) and about **30%** foresee a **positive** impact (those who welcome social change and progress). This even spread suggests no overwhelming consensus on social value shifts; many are in “wait and see” mode, unsure how changes in social norms or culture will trickle down to their own lives.

CHAPTER 3: FUTURE AWARENESS

FIGURE 4: STUDENT SENTIMENT ON FUTURE TRENDS



NOTE: Student sentiment on major future trends. Bars show the percentage of respondents who feel each trend will impact them negatively (red), neutrally (gray), or positively (green). Neutral indicates expecting neither positive nor negative effect. We see that Climate Change is viewed far more negatively than positively, Emerging Tech opinions are split, Big Cities' Growth leans positive for many, and Shifting Values has a large neutral contingent. These patterns are discussed below.

CHAPTER 4

KNOWLEDGE GAPS

► What Students Need to Know More

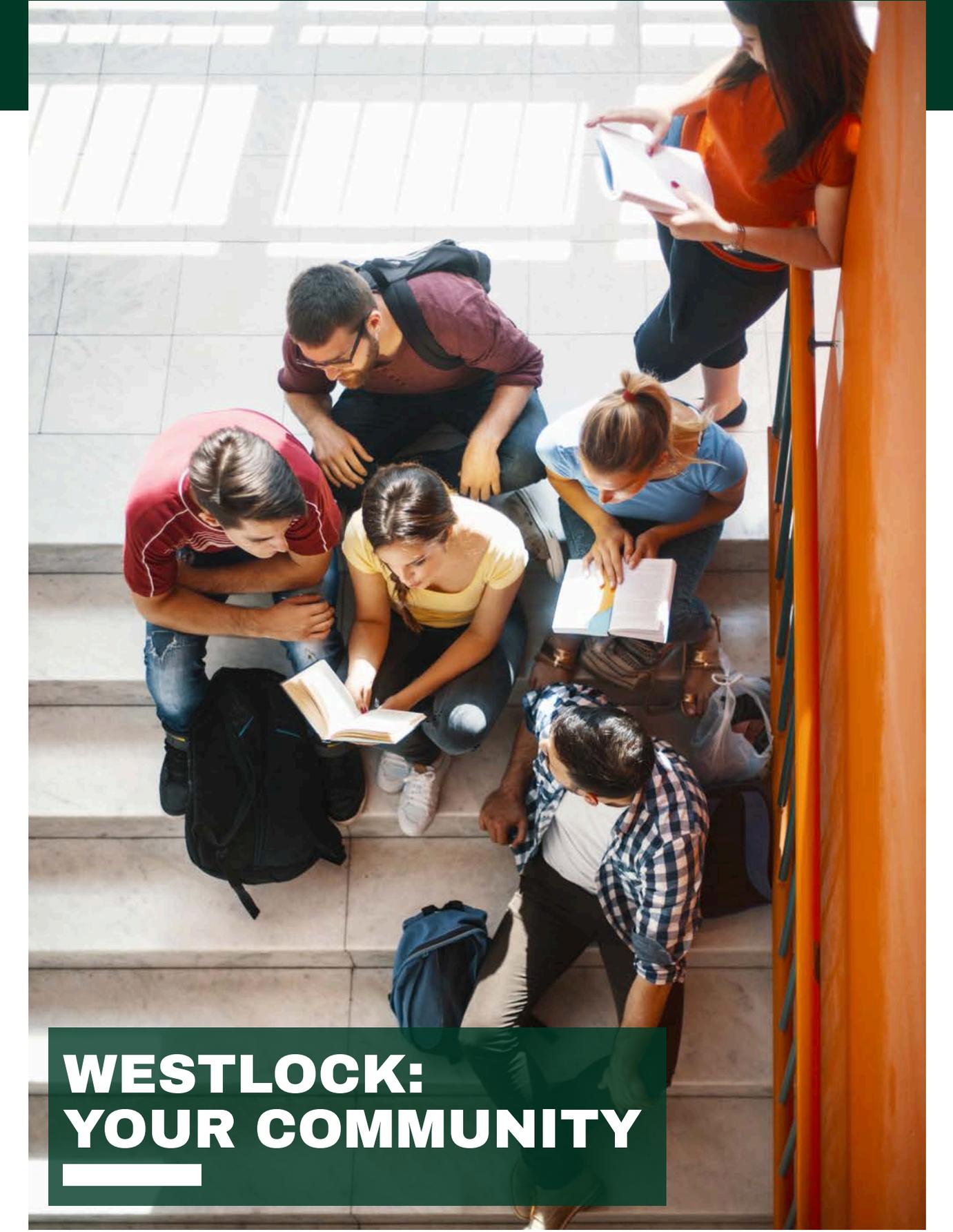
About: Finally, this section asked, *“What do you think you need to know more about to be best prepared for the future?”* (open-ended).

Students’ answers were very insightful – they often pointed to practical life skills and knowledge gaps they perceive. The most common themes were:

- **Financial Literacy:** By far the most frequent responses related to **money management**. *“How to do taxes,” “how to manage or invest money,” “budgeting,” and “saving”* were mentioned repeatedly. Many students feel school hasn’t taught them these real-world financial skills, and they recognize they’ll need them soon. This was a nearly universal ask: they want to know how to handle taxes, credit, loans, mortgages, and general finances to avoid debt and secure their future.
- **General Life Skills:** Students also want to learn basic “adulthood” skills – e.g. understanding how housing, insurance, and healthcare systems work; cooking and household management; and dealing with “the real world” challenges. Essentially, they desire a roadmap for independent living. Several mentioned things like *“how to get a mortgage,” “how to pay bills,” “how to fix a car,”* etc., indicating a hunger for practical knowledge that will help them live on their own successfully.
- **Career Planning & Job Market:** Some respondents said they need more information on **career paths and post-secondary options**. This includes knowing what jobs are in demand, what different careers entail day-to-day, and how to navigate the job market or further education. They want guidance on making informed career choices – for example, understanding various trades vs. university programs, or how to start a business. Essentially, career counseling and labor market info is a need.
- **Global Issues & Civics:** A smaller group mentioned wanting to better understand **government, politics, and current global issues** (like climate change, international relations) – presumably so they can engage and adapt to these issues as adults. Being more educated on these topics is seen as helpful for their future as informed citizens. Some specifically noted they wish school taught more about how government and elections work, or about world events that could impact their lives.
- **Technology Skills:** A few noted they should improve skills in **emerging technologies** (e.g. coding, computer skills) to be prepared for future workplaces. While not as common as financial literacy, it was on some minds that tech proficiency will be important.

- **Unknown Unknowns:** It's worth noting around 8 students admitted "*I'm not sure what I need to know,*" highlighting that part of being a teenager is not fully knowing what you don't know. This uncertainty itself suggests a need for broader exposure to life skills curricula – since some youth aren't even sure which gaps they have, a comprehensive life-preparedness program could cover many bases.

In summary, Westlock youth are eager for more **practical education to prepare for adulthood** – especially in managing finances and navigating life after high school. They recognize certain essential skills have not been covered in traditional classes. This presents an opportunity for local schools or community programs to offer workshops on taxes, budgeting, basic living skills, career mentorship, etc., which could alleviate some of the anxieties noted above. By equipping students with these skills and knowledge, the community can help them feel more confident and truly "future ready."

A high-angle photograph of a group of six students gathered on a stone staircase. They are all looking down at books or papers, appearing to be in a collaborative study session. The students are dressed in casual attire like t-shirts, jeans, and a plaid shirt. A woman in an orange top is standing on the stairs to the right, also looking at a book. The scene is brightly lit by natural light coming from a window above, creating strong shadows on the steps. A dark green banner is overlaid at the bottom of the image, containing the text 'WESTLOCK: YOUR COMMUNITY' in white, bold, sans-serif font. Below the text is a white horizontal line.

**WESTLOCK:
YOUR COMMUNITY**

CHAPTER 5

SATISFACTION WITH WESTLOCK

This section dives into how students **feel about Westlock as a place to live now**, what they **like or dislike** about it, and whether they envision **staying in the community** after graduation. It also covers factors influencing their stay/leave decision and their ideas for **improving Westlock** for young people. These insights are crucial for the town’s economic strategy – highlighting what might attract or repel the next generation.

➤ **Overall Satisfaction with Westlock (Present):** Students were asked *“How much do you like Westlock as a place to currently live and/or attend school?”* on a 0–10 scale (0 = “not at all”/terrible, 10 = “love it”/excellent). The responses indicate **mixed feelings**, skewing toward ambivalence or slight discontent:

- The **median rating** was **5/10** (neutral), given by 27 students. About **36%** of respondents gave a **positive** rating (6–10), while **41%** gave a **negative** rating (0–4), and **22%** stayed neutral at 5. The average score was **~4.8/10**, just below neutral.

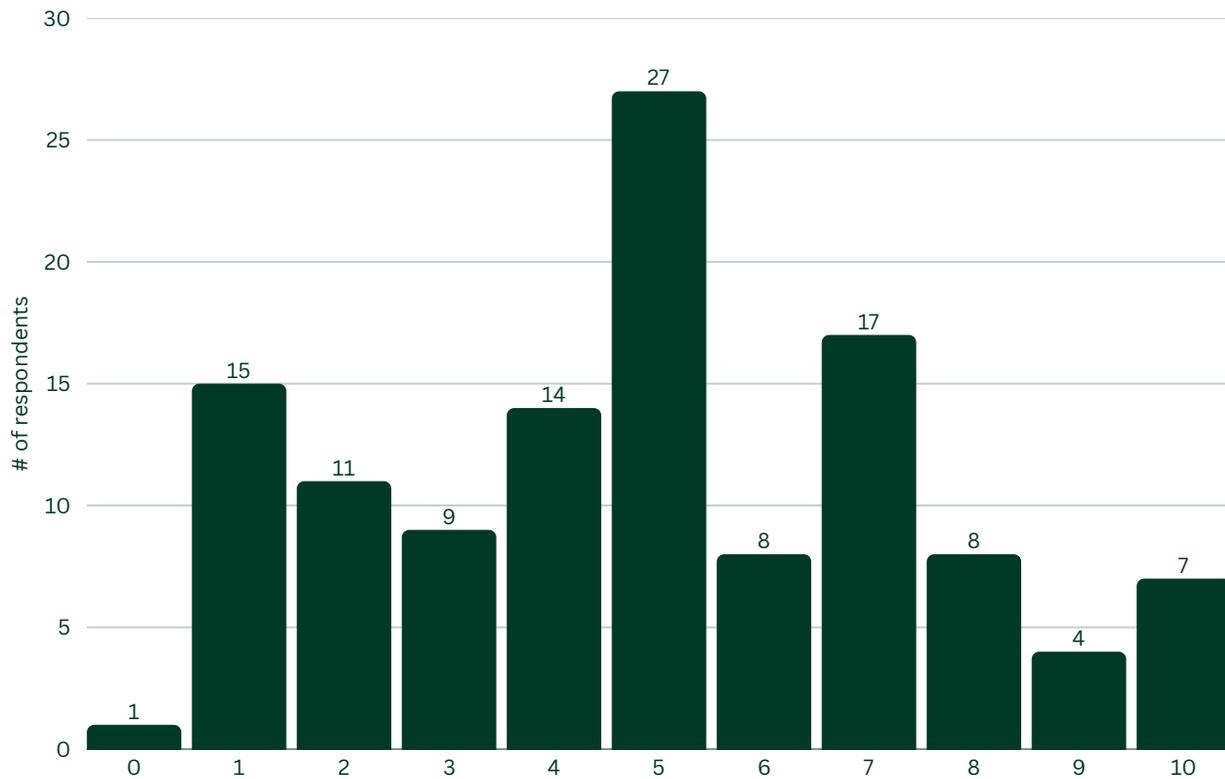
Only about **one-third of students actively like living in Westlock**, and around 4 in 10 actively **dislike** it to some degree, with the remainder feeling “it’s okay” or neutral (*Figure 5*).

Interpretation: The overall lukewarm sentiment suggests that while many youth appreciate certain aspects of Westlock, others feel there are areas that could be strengthened (explored in detail below). The feedback suggests opportunities for the community to enhance youth experience, satisfaction, and retention.

- **School Comparison:** Interestingly, students at **St. Mary Catholic School** reported a somewhat higher liking for Westlock (average **~5.7** out of 10) than those at **R.F. Staples** (average **~4.6** out of 10). Nearly half of St. Mary’s students rated Westlock positively, versus only about one-third of Staples students. This could be due to any number of factors (different school cultures, demographics, or personal experiences), and a smaller sample size. Both groups, however, had a significant number of neutral middle responses. The difference indicates that **Catholic school students, on average, view the town a bit more favorably.**

CHAPTER 5: SATISFACTION WITH WESTLOCK

FIGURE 5: LIKE WESTLOCK AS A PLACE TO LIVE



NOTE: Distribution of “How much do you like Westlock as a place to live?” ratings (0–10 scale) from students. This histogram shows how many respondents gave each rating from 0 (“don’t like it at all”) up to 10 (“love it”). The distribution is fairly spread out, but the most common response was 5/10 (neutral). A significant number of students rated Westlock below 5, indicating dissatisfaction, while a smaller segment rated it highly (8–10). This illustrates the overall **lukewarm to negative tilt** in students’ current view of their community, with neutrality being common and very high ratings relatively rare.

CHAPTER 6

LIKES & DISLIKES

What might explain these lukewarm feelings? The survey's open-ended questions provide context.

► What Students Like Most about

Westlock: Despite middling ratings, students did identify positive aspects of Westlock. In the open-ended question “*What do you like most about Westlock as a community?*”, the top theme by far was the people and community spirit:

- **Friendly, Close-Knit Community:** Dozens of students praised the “*friendly people*” in Westlock. They like that “*you get to know everyone*” in a small town – the sense of a tight-knit, supportive community where neighbors greet each other. Many enjoy the familiarity and safety that comes with a smaller population. Descriptors like “*kind,*” “*everyone knows everyone,*” “*helpful community*” came up frequently. This suggests that social cohesion is Westlock's strongest asset in youths' eyes.
- **Small-Town Lifestyle:** Several students appreciate the quiet, slower pace of Westlock and the lack of big-city congestion. The small size itself was seen as a plus by some – everything is close by, and it's easy to get around. A few mentioned enjoying the rural surroundings and open spaces. In essence, some youth value the simplicity and calm of small-town life as a positive.
- **Local Amenities & Activities:** Some specific community features were highlighted as favorites:

- The **Westlock Rotary Spirit Centre** (recreation centre) and the aquatic centre/pool were frequently named as “*the best things in town.*” Students value having recreational facilities (for sports, skating, swimming, etc.) and see them as Westlock's assets.

- **Sports and extracurriculars** – a number of youth enjoy the sports culture (hockey, school teams, etc.) and local sporting facilities (for example, the golf course was mentioned by a couple of students as something they like).

- **Food outlets:** Some students even cited the local food options or specific eateries – with one common example being “*McDonald's,*” which a few students (half-jokingly) called the best thing Westlock has. While this may seem trivial, it underscores the importance of hang-out spots for young people; even a familiar fast-food restaurant can be viewed as a key social venue in a small town.

It's important to note that **not all students had something positive** – a small number answered “*Nothing*” when asked what they like, indicating they currently don't see any standout good in the community. But overall, many could name at least one thing they appreciate about Westlock, most often the **communal closeness or specific facilities.**

➤ **What Students Dislike about Westlock:** In contrast, the prompt *“What do you dislike about Westlock as a community?”* elicited numerous critiques. Key issues students have with Westlock include:

- **“Nothing to do” – Lack of Entertainment and Activities:** By far the most common sentiment was that Westlock is boring for youth. Many wrote there are **limited recreational or social options** for young people – *“nothing to do here besides drive to the city,” “nowhere to hang out,” “no places to shop or have fun.”* The absence of a movie theatre, very few restaurants or teen-friendly venues, and a general lack of events make the town feel stagnant to them. This boredom is a major frustration and likely contributes to their desire to leave. In short, **entertainment options for youth are severely lacking in their view.**
- **Poor Infrastructure (Roads):** Surprisingly high on the list were **complaints about Westlock’s roads and town maintenance.** *“The quality of our roads”* (potholes, etc.) was mentioned by at least 23 students. Others described the town as *“unkempt”* or complained about cleanliness and upkeep (e.g., unsightly vacant buildings). The state of roads and sidewalks is noticed by youth – many urged the town to *“fix the roads”* in various comments. This suggests civic infrastructure issues are very visible even to younger. The town’s physical upkeep is a point of pride for these youths.
- **Limited Shopping & High Costs:** Students lament the lack of retail options – *“no mall or nowhere to shop for clothes or affordable groceries.”* They feel they have to travel for most shopping needs, and prices in town (due to limited competition) are high. The strip mall’s decline was specifically noted (with one saying it needs rebuilding with more stores). In short, youth see Westlock as lacking basic **urban amenities** and having a **cost-of-living that doesn’t match the value** (e.g., *“taxes are high and we have bad roads,”* one wrote). The limited shopping (and the related social life around shopping) is a sore point.
- **Social Atmosphere – Closed-mindedness:** Some students described *“entitled/closed-minded”* residents or a *“conservative”* mindset that they find stifling. There is a sense from a few that Westlock can be gossip-prone or not accepting of differences, which they dislike. This hints at a cultural disconnect for some youth with the broader community values. A couple mentioned they feel looked down upon by older residents or that the town isn’t open to new ideas or diversity. In a contemporary context, some youth crave a more progressive, inclusive atmosphere.
- **Crime and Drugs:** A notable subset are concerned about drug use and homelessness in Westlock. Words like *“drugs,” “drug problem,”* and *“homeless people”* came up frequently. These students perceive the town as having

CHAPTER 6: LIKES & DISLIKES

social issues and it makes them feel less positively about the community. Real or perceived increases in crime/drug activity make them uneasy about Westlock's trajectory.

- **“Everyone knows everyone” – The Flip Side:** While community closeness was a plus for some, others cited it negatively – *“everyone is in your business,”* lack of privacy, and small-town drama/gossip were implied complaints. Thus, the tight-knit nature is a double-edged sword depending on perspective: it can feel supportive, or it can feel intrusive and claustrophobic.

In summary, the lack of opportunities – both **recreational and economic** – stands out as a central dislike. Many of these young people feel **bored, constrained, and eager for more** than their town currently offers. Infrastructure and social issues compound the frustration.

CHAPTER 7

LIKELIHOOD OF STAYING IN WESTLOCK

➤ **Likelihood of Staying in Westlock After High School:** Perhaps the most crucial finding for the community: when asked *“Do you think you will stay in Westlock after high school?”*, an overwhelming majority of students said **“No.”** As the pie chart in *Figure 6* illustrates, only about **9%** of respondents currently plan to **stay**, while about **62%** plan to **leave**, and the remaining **29%** are **unsure** or undecided:

- Even those “unsure” tend to lean toward leaving in many cases (some wrote that they *don’t think they’ll stay unless something changes*). So the truly enthusiastic stayers are very few (about **1 in 10** students or less).
- **No St. Mary’s student said they would stay.** Interestingly, all of the few “Yes, I’ll stay” responses came from R.F. Staples students. Among the Catholic school respondents, **0% said yes**, **~63% said no**, and **37% unsure**. This might reflect different family expectations or just the small sample, but it’s notable that not a single St. Mary’s student currently sees themselves staying in Westlock. (It could be that many plan to pursue post-secondary education which will take them away, as St. Mary’s had very high college-going intentions – see later.)
- The desire to leave correlates with the earlier satisfaction question: those who gave Westlock low ratings were also in the “No” camp for staying.

➤ **Factors Influencing the Decision to Stay or Leave:** Students described in their own words *“What things are most likely to impact your decision to stay or leave Westlock.”* Their answers point to a few dominant decision factors:

- **Career and Job Opportunities:** This was the top factor given by students. If Westlock **can’t provide good jobs or career paths**, students will leave. Many said if there were more (or better paying) local job opportunities in their field, they might consider staying. Conversely, lack of opportunity = leaving. As one put it, *“I have no opportunities here – I can’t make the connections or gain higher education, so I have no use staying as a young adult.”* It’s clear that **economic opportunity is key to retention**. Students largely feel that to pursue their desired careers – whether in trades, medicine, tech, etc. – they must go elsewhere (where colleges, employers, or industry hubs are located).
- **Post-Secondary Education:** Closely related, the availability (or absence) of higher education locally is critical. Students who want to attend university or college note they’ll have to leave Westlock to do so (since Westlock has no post-secondary institution). A few mentioned that *unless a nearby option exists for their desired program, they’ll move*. For many, going to university means leaving Westlock by default – even if they might consider returning later (though many did not

indicate plans to return).

- **Cost of Living & Housing:** Some students indicated they would factor in housing costs and general cost of living. A few explicitly said *“the price of housing”* or *“cost of living”* will affect their choice. This suggests that even if they could find a job locally, if living independently in Westlock is too expensive or difficult, they wouldn’t stay. *(Note: Westlock’s housing might actually be cheaper than a big city, but if jobs are low-wage, affordability is relative.)*
- **Family and Personal Ties:** About as many students mentioned **family** as a factor as those who mentioned jobs. Those with strong family roots in Westlock might stay (e.g., to be near family or take over a family business/farm), while others might leave to follow family that moves, or simply to seek independence from family. For some, *“if my family stays, I might stay”* and vice versa. Friends and relationships can play a role too – a few noted that if their close friends leave, they will likely leave as well. Essentially, **personal relationships and obligations** can influence their final decision.
- **Lifestyle and Amenities:** The community’s **quality-of-life offerings** matter. Students said things like *“if Westlock had more to do, I’d consider staying.”* Recreation, shopping, and entertainment (or lack

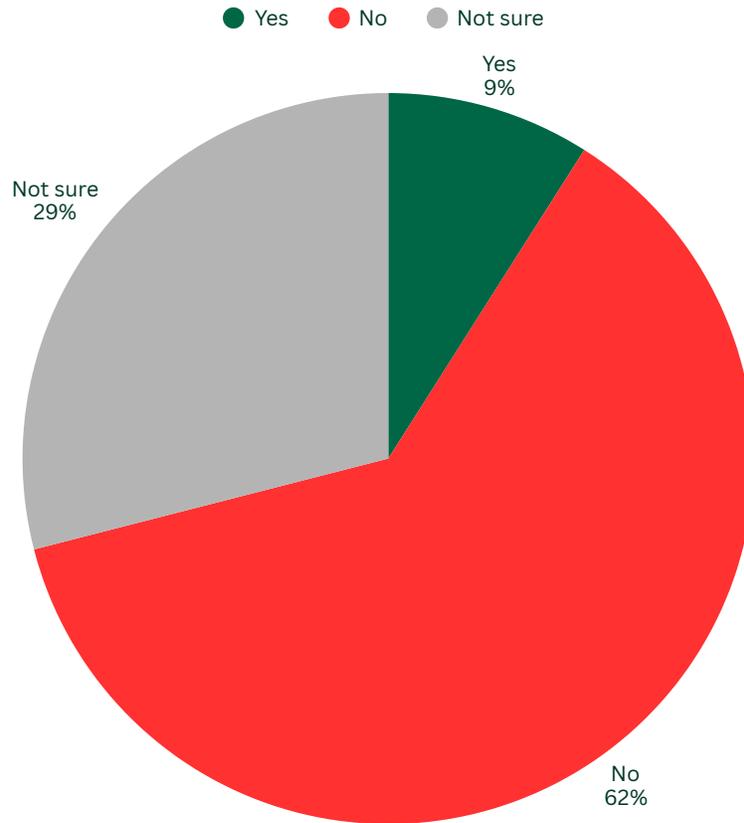
thereof) will influence them – essentially the same “likes/dislikes” factors above become make-or-break for staying. If the town remains “boring” or doesn’t cater to young adults, they see no compelling reason to stay. On the flip side, if Westlock were to offer a more vibrant young adult life, some might be more inclined to return after college or stay for employment.

- **Safety and Environment:** A handful mentioned they’d leave if problems like crime/drugs get worse. The town’s **social environment** (open-mindedness, inclusivity) also plays a role – one student said if the town were *“more accepting”* they’d be more inclined to stay. This ties back to the earlier note that atmosphere is an important factor to young people.

In short, to retain youth, **Westlock would need to provide post-secondary and job opportunities, an affordable, appealing lifestyle, and a welcoming community atmosphere.** Currently, most don’t see those conditions being met, so they plan to seek them elsewhere. This is valuable feedback: the recipe for youth retention is multi-faceted but starts with jobs/education and quality of life.

CHAPTER 7: LIKELIHOOD OF STAYING IN WESTLOCK

FIGURE 6: PLANTS TO STAY IN WESTLOCK AFTER GRADUATION



NOTE: Plans to stay in or leave Westlock after graduation. In this survey, only roughly 1 in 11 students (9%) intends to remain in Westlock, while about two-thirds (62%) expect to move away, and the rest (29%) are unsure. This visualization highlights that many youth are considering paths and a future beyond Westlock. This presents an opportunity to explore what would encourage them to build their futures here.

CHAPTER 8

WESTLOCK BETTER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

➤ **What Would Make Westlock Better for Young People:** Students offered numerous suggestions in response to *“What would make Westlock a better place for young people to live and grow up?”* Their ideas largely target the issues raised in previous question. Common suggestions include:

- **More Activities & Places for Youth:** This was the most common request. Students want **additional recreational facilities and hangouts:** e.g., *“build a little cheap movie theatre like Barrhead has,” “more restaurants (sit-down places) that aren’t all run by one guy,” “somewhere to go on weekends that’s fun and affordable.”* Ideas ranged from an arcade or youth centre, to regular events/festivals for young people, to simply having a coffee shop or safe space to socialize. The underlying theme: **invest in entertainment and social infrastructure for teens.** Many believe if Westlock had even a few more venues or activities geared toward youth, it would significantly improve their quality of life.
- **Improve Shopping Options:** Revitalizing the retail scene was a frequent suggestion. Students mentioned rebuilding the **strip mall** with more stores, bringing in popular chain stores or a small mall, and generally providing better local shopping so that young people don’t have to leave town for basic needs or hobbies. In summary, the need expressed is to

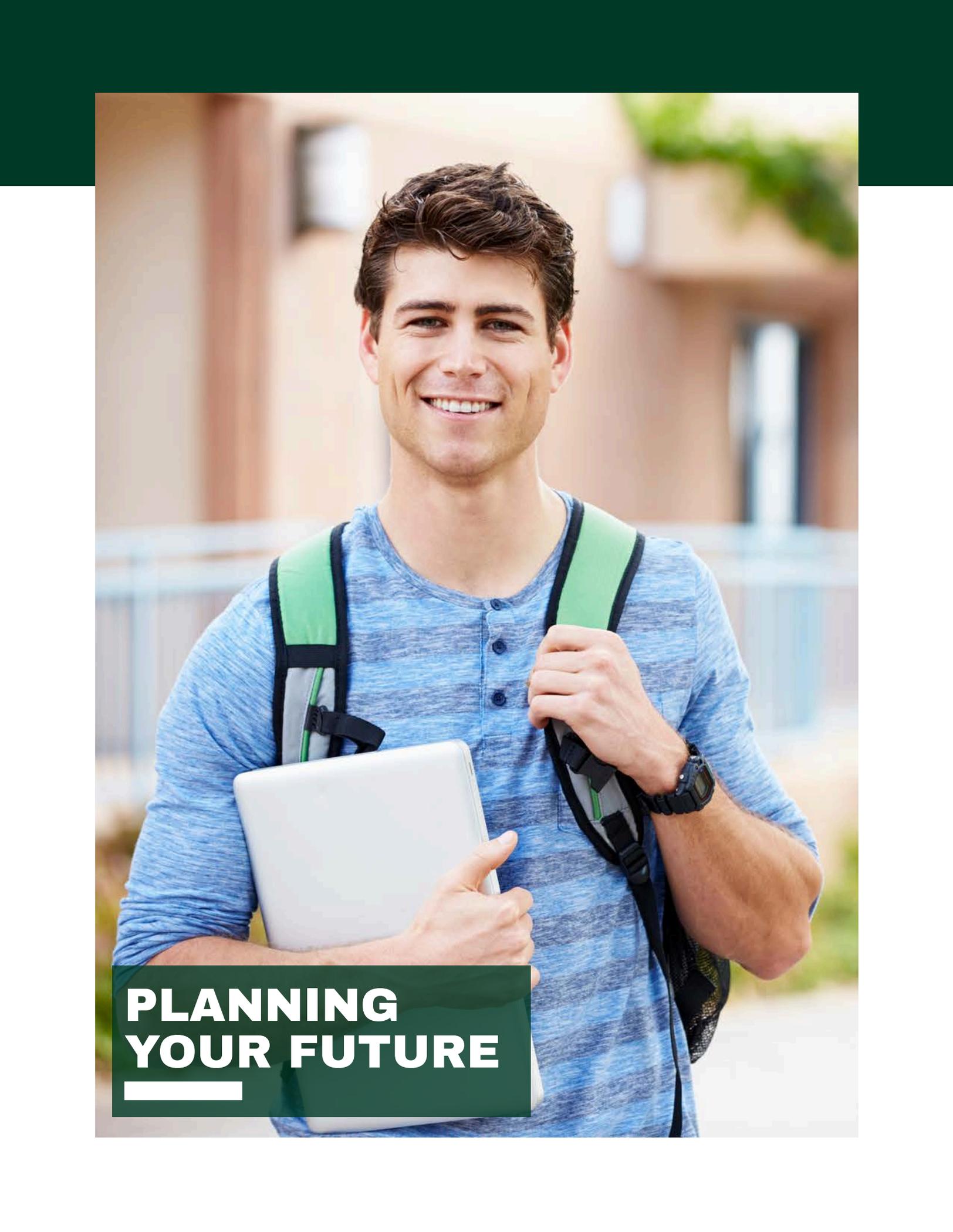
need expressed is to **diversify the retail offerings** – clothing stores, a bookstore, a tech/gaming shop, etc., were mentioned as ideas. The current that appeals to youth is both an inconvenience and part of what makes town “boring” in their eyes.

- **Job and Career Opportunities:** Many reiterated the need for more **local jobs**, especially diversifying beyond the few major employers. Suggestions included encouraging new businesses (so there are part-time jobs for youth now, and career options later), including in sectors beyond just retail – *“expanding into more sectors.”* Essentially, **economic development that creates attractive jobs for young people is key** to making the town viable for them. Some specifically mentioned wanting to see more industry or offices that could employ young professionals, or incentives for entrepreneurs to set up in Westlock, so that not everyone has to go to the city for a good career.
- **Address Social Issues:** Students are aware of and concerned about visible social issues. Several said the town would be better with *“less drugs on the streets”* and more support to solve homelessness. They feel tackling these problems would improve the community atmosphere and safety for everyone. This implies investing in **addiction programs, policing, and social services** – are seen as important by youth.

- **Community Attitude and Inclusivity:** Some students noted Westlock needs to become “*more accepting*” and less strictly conservative to appeal to youth. They desire a culture that is open to new ideas and that treats young people with respect. One comment was “*the town needs to be less strict about its conservative view if it wants younger people to stay.*” Another student pleaded for older folks to **treat young workers better** (perhaps they’ve experienced disrespect in entry-level jobs). Fostering a **youth-friendly, inclusive social climate** is part of their vision for a better Westlock. This could mean involving youth in community decisions, celebrating diversity, and shedding the “old-fashioned” image.
- **Infrastructure and Appearance:** A number of students circled back to fixing the basics – “*fix the roads,*” “*clean up the town,*” “*better lighting (e.g., at the Santa parade).*” While these might seem general, it matters to youth that the town looks and feels well-maintained and vibrant rather than run-down. Beautification projects, road repairs, and keeping public spaces tidy would signal to them that the town is cared for and worth caring about.
- **Education and Youth Programs:** A few suggestions dealt with education: “*put classes in school that help you with money (life skills)*” – echoing their earlier desire for practical learning. Others mentioned wanting more **extracurricular programs or clubs**. Basically, support youth development inside and outside school. This could include leadership programs,

volunteering opportunities, or youth entrepreneurship workshops, to give students more enrichment without leaving town.

To encapsulate, students desire a Westlock with **more vibrancy and opportunities** – a town that offers at least some of the amenities of city life, without losing its sense of community. They want to feel **valued and catered to**. These suggestions present a clear roadmap of what might convince more young people to build their futures in Westlock rather than elsewhere. If the town can add entertainment options, improve infrastructure, widen career and education avenues, and adopt a more youth-forward mindset, some of these survey respondents might reconsider their plans to leave.

A young man with short brown hair, smiling broadly, is wearing a blue patterned t-shirt and a green and black backpack. He is holding a silver laptop under his left arm. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a brick building and a metal fence.

**PLANNING
YOUR FUTURE**

CHAPTER 8

YOUR FUTURE PATH

The final section of the survey focused on students' plans and interests regarding further education and careers – including whether they see Westlock in their future, what fields they're drawn to, and who/what influences their career thinking. This section ties the personal aspirations of students back to the community context, revealing whether local opportunities align with youths' goals.

➤ **Interest in Westlock as a Place to Live/Work in the Future:** Students rated *“How interested are you in Westlock as a future option to live and work in?”* on a 1–10 scale. The results reinforce earlier findings – **interest is low overall:**

63% gave a **low interest** rating ($\leq 4/10$), and the single most common answer was **1/10 (not interested at all)** – 46 students picked “1,” essentially indicating *“Westlock is not in my future plans.”* Another **22%** were **neutral** (5/10), and only **~18%** showed **high interest** (above 5) in a future in Westlock.

This aligns with the earlier statistic that ~9% intend to stay after high school. The majority currently do not envision their career or adult life happening in Westlock. Any interest in returning is lukewarm at best for most.

Comparison: Grade 11 students were slightly more likely to say they'd consider Westlock in their future (perhaps because they haven't left yet and might be a bit more open). Grade 12s,

having made more concrete post-graduation plans, had an even lower interest in returning. However, both grades' interest in building a life in Westlock is quite low across the board. This suggests that without changes, many of these youths see their futures elsewhere – at least during their prime career years.

➤ **Plans for Higher Education:** A bright spot: when asked *“Will you pursue higher education after high school?”*, the vast majority of these students have academic or training ambitions:

- **85** students (approximately **70%**) answered **“Yes,”** they plan to pursue some form of higher education. Only **9** students (**7%**) said **“No”** (not pursuing further education), and **26 (21%)** said **“Don't know”** or are undecided. A small number skipped the question. This suggests a strong college-going culture, where most aim for university, college, or trades training after Grade 12.

By school: Notably, **none of the St. Mary's respondents said “No.”** All 24 either plan to pursue higher ed (18 students, 75%) or are unsure (6 students, 25%). Among R.F. Staples respondents, **67%** said yes and **9%** said no (the remainder unsure).

By grade: Interestingly, **Grade 11s** showed a slightly higher intention for higher education (**73% yes**) than **Grade 12s (62% yes)**. It could be that some Grade 12s have decided on immediate employment, apprenticeships, or other paths (since they are on the cusp of graduating, their plans are more concrete and a few have chosen non-college routes), whereas Grade 11s still express aspirations (some of which may change by next year). Nonetheless, both grades have strong majorities aiming for education or training beyond high school. This correlates with leaving town (since Westlock doesn't have a college or university).

This finding indicates a need to consider **how Westlock might attract these individuals back after they finish their education**. If many will earn degrees or certifications elsewhere, creating appealing professional opportunities in Westlock for graduates could help stem the outflow. Otherwise, they may settle in the cities where they study or find their first jobs.

Interest in Career Fields: Students rated their interest in various broad career fields (as possible areas of study or work) on a scale of 1-10. The chart in *Figure 7* summarizes the percentage of students who expressed high interest (a rating of 6-10) in each field:

- **Recreation & Outdoors** and **Technology & Equipment** fields garnered the most interest. Around **44%** of students are interested in **Recreation/Outdoor** careers (e.g., sports, fitness, parks management, physical education) and **40%** in **Tech/Equipment** careers (e.g., IT, engineering, mechanics or trades involving technology). These areas also had relatively higher average interest ratings. This suggests many students could see themselves in technical fields or in physically active/outdoor roles. Westlock's economy could potentially tap into these interests (for example, through recreation programs or tech-related training opportunities).
- **Health and Service** fields (e.g., healthcare, social work, education) also attracted considerable interest – about **37%** showed high interest in health/service careers. This is significant; over one-third might pursue careers as nurses, doctors, paramedics, therapists, teachers, or similar helping professions. This aligns with some students mentioning wanting to help people and also with the presence of a hospital as a local asset. Supporting pathways into healthcare and public service could benefit both the students and the community (if some return to work locally).
- **Business/Management** and **Environmental/Natural Resources** fields had more moderate appeal. Roughly **22%** are interested in business fields (management, finance, entrepreneurship), and about 19% in environmental or natural resource careers (e.g., agriculture, environmental science, forestry). While there are certainly some enthusiasts in these areas, a majority were lukewarm or not interested. For example, nearly half the students rated Business a very low interest (perhaps finding it less exciting or too generic). Environmental fields might have

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been niche, though notable given the region's agricultural base.

- **Urban Planning/Property Development** was the least popular by far – only ~16% expressed high interest, and over half gave it a “1” (no interest) rating.

These patterns can inform local career counseling and economic initiatives. For instance, the popularity of tech and recreation suggests emphasizing opportunities in those sectors (*e.g., coding programs, sports management training, equipment operation trades*) might resonate well.

➤ **Specific Careers Desired:** When asked “*What type of career or employment do you want to pursue?*” (open-ended), students provided a wide array of aspirations. There was no single dominant career – the responses were quite diverse – but some clusters emerged:

- **Trades and Technical Work:** A sizable number of students are interested in skilled trades or technical jobs. For example, many mentioned careers like **mechanic** (*especially heavy-duty mechanic*), **welding/welder, electrician, plumber, HVAC technician, or similar trades**. The word “mechanic” appeared very frequently. This aligns with the interest in technology/equipment fields. These students are eyeing industries where they can work with their hands and machinery – automotive, oil and gas, construction, etc. Trades are clearly a popular route, which is promising since those can be lucrative and often needed locally.

- **Healthcare:** Several students indicated plans to go into **health professions** – *e.g., nursing* was mentioned often, along with a few aspiring **paramedics, doctors, or veterinary roles**. This matches the interest seen in health fields and is a promising sign for those talent pipelines (especially given rural areas often need healthcare workers). Encouraging these students and possibly creating ties with the local hospital or clinics for training could be beneficial.
- **Business and Entrepreneurship:** A few expressed interest in business careers, including starting their own business. Some said they want to pursue **business management** or **finance** (though this group was smaller compared to trades/health). Entrepreneurship came up a couple of times – a student wanting to “*run my own company*” for instance. This shows some youth have a go-getter, self-starter mindset that could be nurtured (perhaps through youth entrepreneurship programs or support for young startups).
- **Education and Social Services:** A handful of students want to become **teachers** or work in fields like **childcare, counseling, or social work**. Given some mentioned liking to help others, it fits that they see themselves in educational or community support roles.
- **Creative and Personal Service Careers:** We saw mentions of careers like **hair stylist, chef/cooking, music/music industry, and even acting or arts**. These were individual responses but show the range of interests – not everyone is headed for conventional paths; some have creative or service-oriented dreams.

- **Law Enforcement/Military:** A couple indicated plans to join the **police (RCMP)** or other law enforcement. Another mentioned interest in the **military**. These were less common but present, reflecting that some see serving in uniform as their path.
- **Agriculture:** Given our rural context, it's worth noting many plan on **farming or agriculture-related** careers, continuing the region's agricultural tradition or agribusiness sector.

This variety illustrates that Westlock's youth have a **broad span of career dreams** – from trades and healthcare to creative arts and agriculture. It highlights the importance of providing **exposure and opportunities in many fields**, and possibly connecting them with role models in those careers. For the town, it means the future workforce is not one-size-fits-all; strategies to support youth should consider multiple pathways (trades training, college scholarships, local job creation in diverse sectors, etc.).

➤ **Influences on Career Decisions:** Students responded to *“What is most influencing your current thinking about future study or career options?”* The answers overwhelmingly pointed to two main influences:

- **Money and Financial Security:** This cannot be overstated – *“money”* was by far the most common word in these responses. About **half the students** explicitly said that **earning a good income or financial stability** is the biggest factor in their career decisions. Many phrased it as needing a job that *“pays well”* so they can afford life's

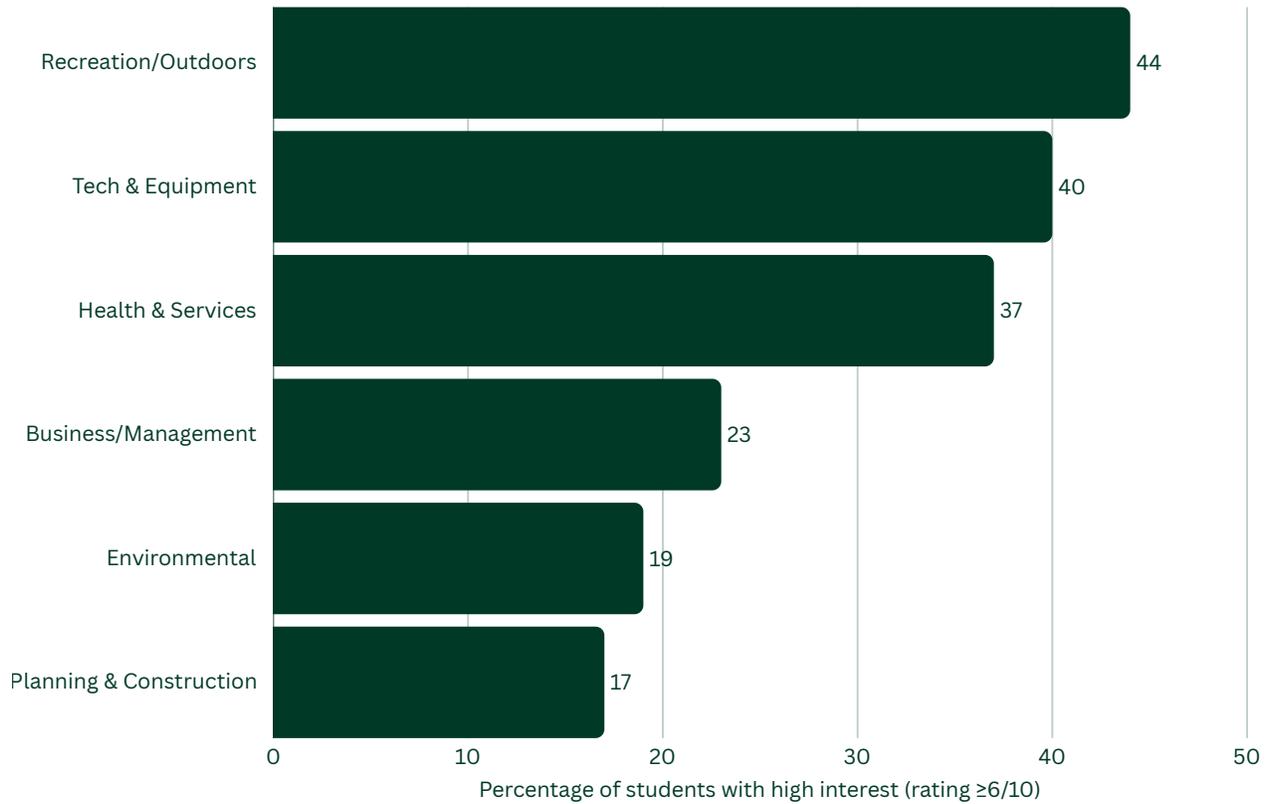
expenses. One gave a striking example: *“I need something that makes good money so I can get my wisdom teeth removed, as well as live without anxiety about money.”* This practical mindset shows that even at a young age, financial realities are top-of-mind. The high cost of living and desire for a comfortable life are steering them towards careers perceived as lucrative. In short, **pragmatism and economic need** are front and center – they want careers that will reliably support them.

- **Passion and Personal Interest:** The next biggest influence is choosing a career they will **enjoy or find fulfilling**. Many students said they want to pursue something they *“love”* or *“have interest in”* – whether it's helping people, working with technology, being creative, etc. Personal passion is guiding them, often hand-in-hand with money (e.g., *“something I enjoy but also makes money”* was a common sentiment). So the ideal for many is to find the intersection of **what they love and what pays well** – the classic career advice in action.

In summary, **practicality (income and job stability) combined with personal passion are the twin drivers of career choice** for these students. They want careers that can reliably support them financially *and* that they won't dread doing every day. Community leaders and educators can leverage this by ensuring students have information on which careers offer both good pay and personal fulfillment potential, and by helping them see pathways to achieve those careers.

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FIGURE 7: TOP CAREER FIELDS OF INTEREST AMONG STUDENTS



NOTE: Top career fields of interest among Westlock students (percentage of respondents who rated their interest $\geq 6/10$ in each field). Recreation/Outdoors and Technology/Equipment were the most popular fields, while Planning & Construction was the least popular. This chart highlights which sectors hold the greatest appeal to youth when they imagine their future careers.

