

Do Rob Ford's Don Bosco students need saving? It's complicated

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When the Don Bosco Eagles won a Metrobowl qualifying match this week, photographers rushed onto the field and reporters from major news outlets breathlessly tweeted about the squad's 31-0 victory.

Their interest in the game had nothing to do with high-school football or Don Bosco Catholic Secondary School and everything to do with the man who coaches the Eagles, Rob Ford. (The mayor, who would have been defending himself in a \$6-million libel trial on Thursday if not for his coaching commitment, looked ecstatic until someone dumped a jug of Gatorade on his head.)

The spotlight that follows Mr. Ford has fallen on Don Bosco a lot this autumn, and it has not always cast a flattering glow on the Etobicoke school, its students or their parents.

Mr. Ford and his councillor brother, in their zeal to defend the mayor's devotion to coaching, have sometimes portrayed Don Bosco and its team as full of troubled youth with scant support at home. It is the place where, according to Councillor Doug Ford, his brother does more than anyone else in the city to "mentor black youth"; a place where players "look up in the stands and they don't see a father, they don't see a mother, they see Rob Ford standing there and supporting them," as Doug said on the brothers' radio show in September.

But this isn't quite the school the Fords have made it out to be.

The high school at 2 St. Andrews Boulevard, near the corner of Islington Avenue and Dixon Road, is in the midst of a turnaround. And conversations with students and parents suggest the transformation has little to do with football victories and much to do with dedicated staff and the arrival four years ago of an energetic new principal.

Literacy scores are up. More students are on track to graduate. Suspension rates have plummeted by 48 per cent since 2008-2009. Don Bosco, part of the Catholic school board, recently added a program allowing ambitious students to earn university credits and another in "global education" that the principal compares to a private school offering.

The transformation is physical too: The board has doled out more than \$1.1-million to renovate the gym and upper floors.

That does not include the \$75,000 Mr. Ford, with city council's support, secured from a developer to fix up the locker room.

All the good news does not mean Don Bosco is problem-free. Math scores have fallen and, despite positive strides, the school's academic performance still lags behind the board and provincial averages. Only a handful of Don Bosco parents came to cheer on the Eagles when they won the Catholic league championship Nov. 8, but as those who turned up that day pointed out, the game was at 2 p.m. on a weekday, when most people work.

There are, in other words, shades of grey here – and the more encouraging end of the spectrum may not always be visible from Coach Ford's vantage point on the sidelines.

"I'm here every day. He [Mr. Ford] is not here every day," said Deanna Smith, a volunteer hall monitor whose daughter, Keanna, 15, and son, Keeyan, 17, attend Don Bosco. "The school is a very excellent school. The students are great. You hear a lot of bad things, but it's not true."

Ms. Smith, toting a walkie-talkie, watched on a recent Wednesday as a new, young drama teacher led a laughing class of budding thespians through exercises on the auditorium stage.

Earlier that day, students sat quietly in the same auditorium while an 87-year-old Second World War veteran spoke and took questions for nearly an hour. Even earlier, the school hosted an 8 a.m. awards breakfast to applaud its most successful students.

Asked if the school has trouble persuading parents to participate, Principal Ugo Rossi replied: "My response to that is we had 200 some-odd parents here this morning celebrating the wonderful achievements our students are having."

Nicholas Kharouba, 17, Cindy Aramburo, 16, and Antonino Calarco, 16, are three such high-achieving Don Bosco students.

Mr. Rossi invited the articulate trio into his office to talk about Don Bosco. They praised its energetic teachers, its small and tight-knit student body – the school has just under 600 students – and its academic offerings.

They also shrugged off the negative attention that Mayor Ford's antics have brought to the school.

“It just doesn’t affect us, in terms of our education,” Mr. Kharouba said.

Even Don Bosco students who have not been hand-selected by the staff to speak to a reporter see the improvements.

“You know, like, the feel of a school? It’s just a lot friendlier now. I’ll put it in those terms. People are nicer to each other and it’s less violent,” Nick Smith, 17, said outside the school.

“Our school used to be a lot worse, our principal came in and shaped things up, Mr. Rossi. It’s a lot different since I was here in Grade 9.”

He is not the only student who credits Mr. Rossi with turning the school around since taking the helm four years ago. With his shaved head and booming voice, Mr. Rossi is a commanding, popular presence on a tour of Don Bosco. He knows the students by name. He shoos three late boys off to class; with a snap of his fingers, he convinces another to take off his hat in the hallway.

Mr. Rossi – who sports a WWJD bracelet (What Would Jesus Do?) – is a relentless booster of a school he calls the “jewel of Etobicoke.”

But he’s also willing to admit Don Bosco’s shortfalls. “Right now math is a challenge and we acknowledge that,” he said.

Scores on the province’s standardized Grade 9 math test have dropped in the past couple of years. The results are particularly abysmal for students in the less rigorous applied math stream: Only 10 per cent of those students met or exceeded the provincial standard in 2010-2012, down from 26 per cent in 2008-2010, according to official scores.

Students in the academic stream fared better, but only 50 per cent met the standard in the past two years, down from 65 per cent.

Recognizing the numeracy struggle, the board has given Don Bosco an extra math teacher so it can offer math classes as small as 12 students. They’ve also started an after-school math homework club modelled in part on a Saturday morning drop-in program the school used to boost its English scores.

Although those scores are indeed up, Don Bosco performs well below the average for the Toronto Catholic District School Board and the province.

The school is ethnically diverse. The neighbourhood immediately to the school’s west is made up of brick bungalows with tidy lawns and double-car garages, but the school also draws students from more modest areas, including the rundown apartment blocks on the east side of Islington, and some tougher pockets of North Etobicoke.

In the stands of North York’s Esther Shiner stadium at another Eagles victory on Nov. 8, some Don Bosco parents admitted there is a grain of truth to the Ford brothers’ characterization of the football team.

The crowd for the 2 p.m. game was sparse. Supporters of the Senator O’Connor Blues significantly outnumbered the Bosco fans, which included football mom and team booster Laurel Love.

“They came for the football program, because it keeps them focused,” said Ms. Love, whose son, Dayvon Love, left Nelson A. Boylen Collegiate Institute near Jane Street and Highway 401 for Don Bosco in Grade 10. “I mean, come on, where would these black boys be if they didn’t have football? Think about it, honestly. You’d be reporting on the body on the street.”

At the same time as she acknowledged the stereotype, Ms. Love and her bleacher-mates defied it.

She attends as many games as she can. Dayvon’s older brother, Jovan, was there to cheer too, as was Garfield Jones, whose nephew, Patrick Jones, also plays for the Eagles.

Where was Patrick’s father? “His dad’s always on the field over there,” Ms. Love said. “His dad never leaves the sidelines.”

As three other Bosco fathers in the stands pointed out, plenty of parents have trouble leaving work in the middle of the afternoon to watch a football game.

The Ford brothers’ comments don’t faze them. All are big fans of Coach Ford and his insistence that their sons attend practice and class if they want to keep donning the Don Bosco jersey.

Teresa Bridport, the co-chair of Don Bosco’s parent council, is willing to cut Mr. Ford some slack because of his long-time volunteer commitment to the school, which began in the early 2000s.

“It was brought up at our last parent council meeting and we talked about it. Some of the parents on the council or who attend the meetings, their [sons] do play football and they certainly don’t think their sons would be in gangs if Rob Ford was not the coach,” she said.

“Rob Ford is not the most eloquent speaker, but I think he has the biggest heart.”