

DEAR SIR...

As Thornhill Academy becomes the latest school to allow Channel 4 to film within its classrooms and corridors, **Vic Goddard** has a few friendly words of advice for the redoubtable Mr Mitchell

It's been quite surreal these last few weeks, Mr Mitchell, watching you in *Educating Yorkshire* from the comfort of my sofa rather than hiding behind it wondering why on earth I thought I looked good in a tank top. I have been told by numerous people that we were 'brave' (which normally really means 'crazy') to open up our school to the cameras – but I think that you and the governors of Thornhill Academy are the brave ones. Our expectations for people watching the series were very low, so the level of public interest we'd generate wasn't a major concern. Our priority was to ensure the children were safeguarded appropriately – of course, the same will have been true for you, but we didn't have the added pressure of knowing that our exploits would be discussed up and down the country.

As you know, I had the pleasure of visiting Thornhill Academy to speak to you all before you embarked on your televisual experience – but as I said then, until the first show was aired it was impossible to know how it would impact on you individually. As a headteacher I am obviously not shy in offering advice, but unless you have been in that type of spotlight it is difficult to know how it feels.

So, the biggest single piece of advice I can give you now that the series is in the public domain, Mr Mitchell, is to focus on the local feedback, because the national viewpoint – whilst easy to get carried away with – really doesn't matter at all. Schools are focused on the communities they serve and if someone on the other side of the country, or even the world, thinks your school is great, or not so good, it really isn't that important. I have worked in Harlow for well over ten years now and people know who I am and what I stand for. The families of the town will have a view of Passmores that is more likely to be influenced by how well behaved our young people are walking to and from school than what they see on the television.

My second piece of advice would be to not get carried away with the positive feedback that will undoubtedly be thrust under your nose, because if you believe the good stuff you must also be willing to accept the negative stuff and that is a slippery slope to misery. The world of the 21st century critic is not limited to Barry Norman-esque musings that are balanced, thoughtful and normally based on at least some facts. The internet has meant that everyone has

VIC GODDARD IS
HEAD TEACHER AT
PASSMORES
ACADEMY – AS
SEEN ON CHANNEL
4'S 'EDUCATING
ESSEX' SERIES



a forum to share his or her opinion... and everyone seems to think that his or her view is the only accurate one. We recently received some advice online from an anonymous NQT on an online forum as to why we were failing in our duty as headteachers and what we need to do instead:

"Vic and Jonny, your job is to be Mr Nasty whether you accept that or not: support your teachers, say NO, and when you get excellent behaviour, then you can loosen up. I saw make up, phones, ipods and all sorts in these documentaries, it's outrageous."

I thanked them for their advice on your behalf too, Mr Mitchell.

As I said earlier, I have had the privilege of meeting you and getting to know you better than most of the people that now have an opinion on you. I know that you are passionate about your community and every single young person that you serve. I know that you will be receiving calls upon your time to appear on numerous daytime TV shows, which is both weird and exciting (I took the decision to say no, by the way, if I couldn't guarantee to be in school for normal hours, too). However, I can assure you that to the young people in your school you will still be the same Mr Mitchell, who moans at them when they don't live up to the high standards that you want from them and smiles at them when they do. I can hear you saying it already: "Hallelujah for that!"

PS My final piece of advice is to avoid pubs on a Friday night, because I have found out that this is when they tend to be full of teachers celebrating the end of another week at the chalkface, and so you will not get the chance to quietly sip your pint of Yorkshire Best Bitter without regular requests for your picture...

