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ENGLISH only

***OSCE Conference on Tolerance and the Fight Against Racism,
Xenophobia and Discrimination***

***Statement by Sheila Rogers, Chief Executive of the UK Commission for
Racial Equality***

My task today is to discuss some of the work of the CRE around young people and to share some examples of good practice projects within communities in Great Britain.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Commission for Racial Equality let me explain briefly what we do.

We are a specialised anti-discrimination organisation, funded by Government, but independent from it. Specifically it is our responsibility to

- work to eliminate discrimination on racial grounds
- to promote equality of opportunity and, importantly, to promote good race relations in Britain.

We work in the fields of employment, education, and housing, the provision of foods, facilities and services. We are a regulator and an enforcement body. We will use the power of persuasion where it is appropriate to bring about equality and eliminate racism and we will use the power of the law where necessary.

Yesterday you heard our Minister Fiona McTaggart acknowledge the challenge of how to promote an integrated society within increasingly diverse populations. We at the CRE share that challenge. It is one which particularly demands our attention in the field of education, and in the work we aim to do with young people.

I would like to draw a parallel between the theme of this conference – dialogue and partnerships – and what we at the CRE are striving to achieve with our work on the integration agenda, which we define as a combination of equality and interaction.

Nowhere is this more important than in our schools; but as a commentator in yesterday's Guardian Newspaper said 'Schools are raising young people to pass exams not to face the world.' This is an important point because the reality of the world for many young people is racism and discrimination.

We at the CRE believe that unless we eliminate racial discrimination and harassment we will fail to build a strong civil society with safe and cohesive communities in which our young people learn to understand and respect difference, yet share common values and are confident in their identities as citizens.

To bring about equality with interaction there are a range of approaches which can be adopted, but first we need to acknowledge the things which work against such a vision – poverty and alienation, feelings of powerlessness, segregation, anti-social behaviour and racial and religious discrimination. We believe it is important to accept that creating cohesive communities is the responsibility of us all – both majority and minority communities and that young people are central to the achievement of this vision.

- We must ensure that our young have the opportunity to learn from other cultures and to interact positively with young people from other ethnic and racial groups.
- We must make sure that no young person is denied an opportunity because of racism or discrimination and that they are involved in the decisions that affect them
- Schools need to promote dialogue and informed debate among students from all racial groups on issues around diversity and good relations.
- Young people themselves need to be encouraged to take responsibility for the promotion of good race relations within their student body.

And

- The curriculum must be sensitive to and reflect the different realities of children's lives.

Because

- Children who come from different places have different histories
- The poetry and literature of all backgrounds can help enrich the learning environment
- Schools need to take account of the varied dietary, cultural and religious needs of their pupils – including Gypsy and Traveller children.
- Schools need to take seriously their role in promoting diversity and good relations, involving the communities in which they are located.
- And lets not forget the very important role that sport can play in breaking down barriers.

Let me share with you some specific examples of good practice that we at the CRE have come across through our community conflict project – the Safe Communities Initiative.

1. From Boyhood to Manhood – a project that works with young men excluded from the education system, through mentoring and developing life skills and building self-confidence.
2. The Young Mediators Network, which trains young people across Britain in mediation skills, which they can then use in school and community environments.
3. In Camden in London a project which aims to help young people make informed choices about whether or not to participate in gang culture.
4. A project supporting young people’s development as current and future community leaders.
5. An initiative bringing children together from two mono-cultural schools (one white, one Asian) through the medium of sport and with the support of professional football players.
6. A school making a positive use of links with local communities by involving parents and linking learning to cultural and faith issues.

There are many more examples of how education can contribute to the breaking down of barriers and an increasing understanding among young people of the causes, effects and realities of racism and discrimination.

One final example of an initiative which has great potential to bring about change. In 2000, as Minister McTaggart mentioned yesterday, the British Government amended the Race Relations legislation to place a duty on public bodies, including schools, to develop proactive measure to bring about greater equality. This was a radical and significant legislative response to tackling institutional racism within the public sector. We at the CRE are beginning our assessment of how effective these public duties have been in bringing about change. Certainly it is a model which many others are watching with interest.

Let me finish with one thought. Schools, parents, communities, the public sector and young people themselves must work to increase interaction among and between communities.

To fail to do so will lead to a lack of understanding; it will increase distrust between people and create resentment and often violence, all of which can contribute to the rise of extremism within communities, sometimes reflected in political structures, and often fuelled by some parts of the media. What this can create for young people, indeed for us all, is a vicious circle of racism and hatred which, once in place, is often very hard to break down. We owe it to them to help make sure this doesn't happen.