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SMART pairing improves children's reading skills

I've written about a number of intergenerational programs that bring seniors and children together in educational settings. But I have never come across a program more carefully conceived, organized, trained-for and executed than one called Students and Mature Adults Read Together (SMART). And its success has been measured by educators.

It is sponsored by the Jewish Council of Yonkers, with the administrative backing of the city's school district and support from a number of foundations, government bureaus and nonprofit agencies.

SMART is in its eighth year, functioning at two high schools, two middle schools and 22 elementary schools in Yonkers. It currently involves 275 students who are far below average in their reading ability. More than 150 retired senior citizens take a training course and then are assigned to tutor the students.

For the 2001-02 school year, the Yonkers school district reported: "On average, students participating in the SMART program succeeded in improving their reading achievement."

SMART volunteers have had varied careers. They are largely recruited from Yonkers apartment buildings that have large retiree components.

I visited one couple, both of whom are SMART volunteers. Martin Schwager, 83, is a retired New York state Supreme Court clerk. His wife, Esther, 81, was an administrative assistant in a Manhattan business firm. Both of them have been in the student reading program for its entire eight years.

"It was an eye-opener for us," declared Martin about their first experience going into the schools. "We had a little concern — you know, what you read in the newspapers. But baloney! We came up carrying packages into the school



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55 plus

and the kids would come over and ask, 'Can I help you?' At the end of a term I hear, 'Will you be back next year?'"

"It was wonderful," agreed Esther. "We never had a problem. Only good friends."

Martin continued: "Some of the kids are lost in a classroom, a large setting. But when they come face-to-face with a mentor you can reach them. Even more important than the academic help I give them is that they know I'm a volunteer. I tell the kids that I'm there because I want to be there and that I want to try to help them."

Both Martin and Esther tell stories about successes, near-successes and a few failures. Martin is happy about the program, but he isn't happy about the English Regents test. He complained, "They don't just want you to tell the story of a book, the way they used to. Now they want you to say what did the book mean, what did the author mean?"

One boy whom he was mentoring had done well with him during the program but failed the English Regents and dropped out of school.

"The SMART program has been very satisfying in my life," said Esther. "A lot of us seniors now feel that we're not on the heap yet. SMART has kept me in touch with the young people. We have grandchildren, and I know that basically all kids are alike."

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