

Decision Time

Which Test to Believe

Each spring in the Big Valley Unified School District, students in grades 5, 8, 10, and 12 complete nationally standardized achievement tests in reading and mathematics, as well as a nationally standardized test described by its publishers as "a test of the student's cognitive aptitude." Because William White teaches eighth-grade students in his English classes, he is given the task of answering any questions raised by his eighth-graders' parents about the test results.

He is faced with one fairly persistent question from most parents, particularly those parents whose children scored higher on the aptitude test than on

the achievement test. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Wilkins (Wanda's parents) put the question like this: "If Wanda scored at the 90th percentile on the aptitude test and only at the 65th percentile on the achievement test, does that mean she's not logging enough study time? Putting it another way," they continued, "should we really believe the aptitude test's results or the achievement test's results? Which is Wanda's 'true' test performance?"

If you were William and had to decide how to answer the questions posed by Wanda's parents, what would your answer be?