



Phoenix Christian
PREPARATORY SCHOOL

STANDARDS-BASED GRADING

A GUIDE FOR K-5TH GRADE FAMILIES



EDUCATE | FORM | EQUIP

STANDARDS-BASED GRADING

A CLEARER PICTURE OF YOUR CHILD'S LEARNING

What Is Standards-Based Grading?

Standards-based grading (SBG) means your child is assessed on specific learning standards: what they are expected to know and be able to do. Instead of one overall letter grade, it gives a clearer, more accurate picture of their learning.



Traditional Grading

One grade. A mix of everything.

- Tests & quizzes
- Homework
- Classwork
- Participation
- Effort
- Behavior
- Attendance

All of these are averaged together, so a grade doesn't always show what your child actually knows and can do.



Standards-Based Grading

Separate and more specific.

Academic Grades

- Based only on learning standards
- Shows what your child knows and can do
- Multiple standards reported within each subject

Conduct Grades

- Reported separately
- Includes behavior, effort, work habits, responsibility, and citizenship

WHY IT MATTERS



Focus on learning

Shows mastery of important skills and knowledge.



Supports growth

The most recent evidence of learning counts.



Clearer feedback

See exactly which standards are mastered and which need support.



Fairer and more accurate

Separates academic learning from behavior and other factors.



Less stress, more confidence

Students ask "To what degree do I really understand this?" instead of "What's my grade?"

STANDARDS-BASED GRADING

A GUIDE FOR K-5TH GRADE FAMILIES

During the 2026–2027 school year, Phoenix Christian Preparatory School began using Standards-Based Grading (SBG) in grades K–5 in place of traditional letter grades. This guide brings together why we made this change, how it works day to day at PC, and answers to the questions families ask most.

PART 1: WHY WE MADE THIS CHANGE

The Problem With Traditional Grading

Traditional grades are an average, and averages combine things that don't belong together. A single percentage or letter grade often blends academic mastery with effort, homework completion, participation, attendance, and behavior into one number. Researchers call this “hodgepodge grading,” and it has a real cost: two students can earn the same grade for entirely different reasons, and a parent looking at that grade has no way to tell which student is which.

This isn't a fringe critique. A 2016 review of a century of grading research (Brookhart et al.) found that traditional grades are an unreliable and often invalid measure of what a student has actually learned, precisely because so many non-academic factors get folded in. Marzano (2000) put it directly: traditional grades “are so imprecise that they are almost meaningless” as a measure of achievement on their own.

What Standards-Based Grading Does Differently

SBG asks a different question. Instead of “what percentage did my child earn?” it asks “what does my child know, and how well can they show it?” Students are scored on specific, clearly defined academic standards. Behavior, effort, and work habits are reported separately as a conduct score, rather than folded into the academic score.

This separation is the core of the research-supported case for SBG: it keeps the academic grade honest as a measure of learning, and it gives behavior and work habits their own honest measure too, instead of quietly canceling each other out inside a single blended number.

The Benefits

- **Clearer communication:** families see exactly which standards are mastered and which need support, instead of one blended score.
- **Focus on mastery, not points:** students learn to ask “to what degree do I really understand this” rather than “what's my grade?”
- **Growth over time:** the most recent evidence of learning is what counts, not an average that punishes a rough start.
- **Actionable feedback:** teachers and parents can see precisely where to focus support or enrichment.
- **Better-targeted instruction:** teachers can identify who needs intervention and who is ready to go deeper, standard by standard.

Research on SBG implementation also points to some encouraging patterns: several studies (Fergus & Smith, 2022; Lewis, 2022) found that students in standards-based systems reported lower test anxiety, in part because scores build over time rather than being averaged, so an early low score doesn't haunt the rest of the year. Other research (Pollio & Hochbein, 2015; Knight & Cooper, 2019) found that teachers using SBG became more purposeful in planning and assessment, and that classroom culture shifted from competing for grades toward a shared focus on learning.

We also want to be honest with you: while standards-based grading is well-established, our own learning curve as a school is real. Researchers describe schools nationally as now in a "second wave" of implementation, building on more than two decades of practice. For our school, we are in the first wave of implementation. The research for the shift to SBG is solid; what's still developing is our own fluency with it. That's why Part 1 of this guide focuses on the case for the shift, and why we're asking for your patience as our teachers continue to grow into it.

PART 2: HOW IT WORKS AT PCPS

Two Grades, Not One

Every student receives two separate types of grades each grading period:

- **Academic grades** (Math, ELA, Bible, Science, etc.) reflect a student's mastery of grade-level academic standards, meaning academic ability only. Within a subject, students receive multiple grades, broken out by the individual core standards taught, rather than one blended subject grade.
- **Conduct grades** reflect the behaviors and habits that support learning: citizenship, responsibility, effort, participation, organization, homework completion, and timeliness. Students receive a conduct grade from their homeroom teacher as well as from each specials teacher.

These are reported separately because they measure two different things, and blending them back together would recreate the exact problem SBG is meant to solve.

Academic Performance Scale (4-Point)

Academics are assessed by individual core standard within each subject, rather than one overall subject grade, using this scale:

ACADEMIC SCALE	
E	4 – Exceeds Grade-Level Standard The student consistently demonstrates advanced understanding of grade-level standards. Performance exceeds grade-level expectations through deeper understanding, application, and transfer of learning.
M	3 – Meets Grade-Level Standard The student consistently demonstrates mastery of grade-level standards with minimal errors and little to no support.
AP	2 – Approaching Grade-Level Standard The student demonstrates partial understanding of grade-level concepts, skills, and processes and is progressing toward proficiency. Performance is inconsistent, errors occur frequently, and teacher support is often needed.
BE	1 – Beginning Grade-Level Standard The student demonstrates limited understanding of grade-level concepts, skills, and processes. Significant errors are evident, and substantial teacher support is required.

Conduct Performance Scale (3-Point)

Conduct is assessed in two areas each quarter (Work Habits and Citizenship & Behavior) using this scale:

CONDUCT SCALE	
O	3 – Outstanding The student consistently demonstrates exemplary behavior and citizenship. The student follows school expectations independently, shows self-control, treats others with respect, takes responsibility for actions, and serves as a positive role model for peers.
S	2 – Satisfactory The student usually demonstrates appropriate behavior and citizenship. The student follows school expectations, treats others respectfully, and takes responsibility for actions, though occasional reminders or redirection may be needed.
N	1 – Needs Improvement The student inconsistently demonstrates appropriate behavior and citizenship. Frequent reminders, redirection, or intervention are needed to meet school expectations related to respect, responsibility, self-control, or cooperation.

Policies Families Should Know

- **No extra credit, bonus points, or curving:** this applies to both academic and conduct grades. Scores reflect actual mastery.
- **Zeros are not used:** a score reflecting Beginning (BE) is given when a student has shown little to no knowledge of the standard, not for a missing assignment on its own.
- **Late or missing work does not lower an academic grade:** students are scored on the content they demonstrate within the given timeframe, and incomplete work is addressed through the conduct grade instead, since content grades measure learning, not behavior.
- **Practice work isn't graded academically:** academic grades come from summative assessments, given once students have had time to learn and practice a skill.
- **Individual achievement, not group grades:** even in collaborative activities, each student is assessed on their own understanding.
- **Academic dishonesty** is addressed through conduct and discipline, not the academic score: a student found cheating retakes an alternate assessment for the academic grade, with separate consequences handled through conduct and, where warranted, administration.

Honor Roll (Grades 2–5)

Honor Roll is based on academic performance levels, not conduct scores:

- **Principal's Honor Roll:** predominantly 4s and 3s across all academic standards, with no scores below a 3.
- **Honor Roll:** predominantly 3s, with a limited number of 2s and no 1s.

Conduct is reported separately and isn't part of the academic Honor Roll calculation, though students are still expected to maintain satisfactory behavior and citizenship.

PART 3: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What academic grade should I expect my child to receive?

A 3 is the goal. Where a traditional system trained us to expect an “A,” a 3 in SBG represents successful mastery of the grade-level standard, and that's considered excellent performance.

Should I expect my child to get mostly 4s?

No, and that's by design. A 3 is the expected, desired outcome for most students on most standards. A 4 isn't an “A+” or a reward for doing all assigned work; it's reserved for students who consistently show learning beyond grade-level expectations by applying it in new situations, making deeper connections, or extending it independently.

What if my child receives a 2?

A 2 means your child is still developing proficiency. It identifies a specific opportunity for growth so teachers and parents can target support together. It is not a failing mark.

How is conduct reported, and does it affect the academic grade?

Conduct is scored separately on its own 3-point scale (Outstanding, Satisfactory, Needs Improvement) and never blended into the academic score. This keeps the academic grade an honest measure of learning, and gives conduct its own honest measure too.

As a parent, what should I actually look for?

Focus on: Is my child consistently earning 3s? Are they making progress over time? Where do they need support, and where do they show real strength? Those questions matter more than the number of 4s on the page.

How is Honor Roll calculated under this system?

Honor Roll (grades 2–5) is based on academic performance levels only. Principal's Honor Roll requires predominantly 4s and 3s with none below a 3; Honor Roll requires predominantly 3s with only a limited number of 2s and no 1s.

Is this happening in middle school and high school too?

Not currently. SBG is being implemented in elementary (K–5) for the 2026–2027 school year. Middle school serves as an intentional bridge between the two systems. While it continues to use traditional grades, it also emphasizes many of the same practices SBG builds in elementary, like clear learning targets, feedback tied to specific skills, and opportunities to revise and improve work. This helps students carry forward the mindset SBG builds, even as the report card format transitions toward a traditional GPA structure. High school remains on a traditional GPA-based system, since that's the format our current transcripts, class rank, and college admissions processes are built around. Some high schools nationally have moved to standards-based transcripts, and that's a legitimate model, but it's not the direction we're taking at this time.

OUR GOAL IS TO HELP EVERY STUDENT DEVELOP A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF GRADE-LEVEL STANDARDS, TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THEIR LEARNING, AND BUILD CONFIDENCE AS THEY GROW. IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS BEYOND WHAT'S COVERED HERE, PLEASE REACH OUT. WE'RE GLAD TO WALK THROUGH YOUR CHILD'S SPECIFIC RESULTS WITH YOU.

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