There has been much debate on the strengths and weaknesses of China’s education system.

Its admirers would point to Shanghai topping the OECD league tables consistently, making other countries determined to learn from its success. However, somewhat ironically, internal criticism of the Chinese system has been plenty. The rote learning, memorisation-focused aspects of the system have been criticised, with education experts noting the negative impact this “exam culture” has on children’s creative abilities and critical thinking.

The East vs. West model of education debate has circled for years, but the answer does not lie in a “one or the other” response. Rather, a combination of the strengths of both systems working simultaneously to drill academic discipline and a strong mastery of basic knowledge, with the freedom for pupils to develop their own opinions and apply what they learn to real-world situations, is what we should be striving for. In fact, it was reported in July that 8000 UK primary schools are to adopt the Chinese method of teaching maths in an effort to “learn from the best”.

International schools bridging the gap
International schools in China, including many from the UK, are also stepping up to attempt to bridge this gap in the systems. They are seeking to strike a balance between academic excellence and encouraging pupils to take an active role in the knowledge exchange process. Many of China’s international schools encourage children to get involved inside and outside the classroom – putting forward their ideas, participating in group discussions and leading their own projects in order to get the most out of their education by applying what they learn in lessons.

Dulwich College Suzhou is a pioneering example of how to change the way that students learn. Dulwich, whilst retaining its commitment to prepare students for traditional examinations, also made a strategic decision to emphasise the importance of sustainability and taking care of the environment as part of the school’s philosophy. In doing so, they have incorporated a “learning by doing” curriculum that enables the pupils to get involved with what they are learning. Pupils formed eco-councils, created a vegetable garden and a “sustainability area” on campus that actively applied what they were learning to their physical environment.

According to Ross Allan, Director of Business Administration at Dulwich Suzhou, regular conversations with parents and pupils, communicating the value of spending time on sustainability projects and how this relates to what pupils are learning in traditional core subjects, is an important ingredient in the school’s success. It enables them to demonstrate how such projects contribute to the pupils’ overall personal development, as well as complementing their academic studies.

Opportunities in China

The Chinese system at its core is effective. It creates outstanding pupils in many areas of education and there is much that the West can learn from it. An increasing number of UK schools are now working with Chinese educational and government partners to build upon a solid Chinese educational platform to bring new skills and new ways of learning to young people.

There are opportunities in China for other schools to follow Dulwich Suzhou’s example and promote ways of blending the two systems together to create the best education model for current pupils. Wycombe Abbey School adopted a wholly hybrid curriculum that blends the most successful aspects of each model and also places strong emphasis on extra-curricular activities. Another learning-by-doing method that is growing in popularity and merit is the application of the STEM curriculum (science, technology, engineering and maths) which intends to nurture curiosity and problem solving skills by getting pupils to tackle real-life situations with the materials they learn in class and enabling them to solve issues independently.
Schools and teachers can direct strategy; however, the success of applying a learning-by-doing philosophy is reliant on persuading pupils and parents that this is the right way to go. The most effective learning-by-doing strategies are led by the pupils and bring together all aspects of the school and the community. Proactive communication with parents, who are naturally keen to ensure that their children are successful in exams and gain entry to high level universities, is also important. Parents who can see that academic success can be complemented by student involvement and their personal development outside the classroom are more likely to be supportive of new ideas and investing time in these programmes.

*CBBC will be delivering a report on the Chinese international and bilingual schools market in August 2016. If you are a UK school that would like to receive a copy please contact caitlin.todd@cbbc.org.cn.*

*For more information about establishing an international school in China, please contact CBBC’s International Schools Lead Ann Pan at ann.pan@cbbc.org.cn or our Director for Education Simon Stewart at simon.stewart@cbbc.org.cn*