

Advancing Principals

May 22, 2018



Rooting for Her Hometown

Alongside Her NISL Coach

Focus on Coaching: Sieta Achampong

Sieta Achampong is in her fifth year as principal of the Harrisburg High School SciTech Campus. She started at the school when it opened 15 years ago as a founding teacher, after which she became the dean of students and then an assistant principal.

SciTech was recently one of 120 schools in Pennsylvania to be recognized as a Title 1 Distinguished School for maintaining a certain level of academic achievement.

“We were always the honors program but we were not necessarily reflective of that in true practice,” Achampong explained. “We were just here. The scores showed it, we were going backwards, and now, as you can see, three to five years later, we’re at a point where we’ve made those changes and now we’re starting to get rewarded for things we had set out to do.”

SciTech, an all honors program STEM school, is classified as a Title 1 school with 100 percent of the student population qualifying for free lunch. SciTech has an 86 percent African-American student population and it draws its enrollment exclusively from urban Harrisburg.

In a recent conversation with NISL, both Achampong and her NISL National Coach, Lori Ellis, discussed the challenges from the community the students at SciTech carry with them to school. In fact, Achampong connects especially well with the experiences of her students and parents because she was born and raised in this same community.

“Maybe I’m a little more energized, motivated and determined because I came from this environment,” said Achampong, “but I believe that if I was able to make it through and be successful in life, then our kids can do the same thing. There’s nothing stopping any of our children in the Harrisburg school district from achieving their goals. They can do it. We as adults have to help them see that.”

Achampong has been doing just that her entire career. Her Action Learning Project (ALP), part of the NISL Executive Development Program (EDP) curriculum, provided a timely opportunity to double down on that front. With the curriculum resources from NISL's EDP and the support of her NISL coach, Achampong pursued her vision of pushing her students and the rigor of instruction at the school by strengthening the school's curriculum and building teacher capacity through professional development and meaningful professional learning community meetings (PLCs).

Ellis, when asked about her coachee's project, said "although it was an honors program, Sieta knew that the curriculum wasn't necessarily aligned to what the students needed and she ensured the professional development would be focused on using best practices in professional learning from NISL."

Believing the curriculum did not reflect the rigor required of an honors program, Achampong made sure to be active in her school's PLCs with teachers as they talked about curriculum, student data, how the data drives instruction and what changes needed to be made. She also made sure the professional development led by SciTech's internal coach pushed teachers to be able to effectively teach and deliver a more rigorous curriculum.

Ellis observed that one of the NISL tools she noticed Achampong using most often was the Strategic Thinking Framework, which helped Achampong to consider her school context, the vision she has for the school, and where she's trying to go moving forward.

Using this framework, she developed a process that Achampong described as a "think tank" where the school community committed to workshopping ideas together, all getting behind the school's vision for its students.

According to Achampong, their statewide testing scores continue to improve and SciTech is starting to see faster growth for their low-performing students.

Furthermore, Achampong is able to see the impact of her NISL-informed work beyond simple curriculum alignment, something she attributes to her coaching relationship with Ellis.

"With the ALP, Dr. Lori showed me that this effort is larger than just changing the curriculum so that it aligns with honors, but it's about our culture and climate and improving the school as a whole. When I went into the ALP I wasn't thinking like that, I was just thinking 'I need a curriculum' but I didn't fully realize this is impacting the entire school and environment."

For the recent achievements of SciTech, Achampong is thankful for Ellis' ability to challenge her to see from multiple perspectives and take ownership as a leader.

As their coaching relationship nears its end as this portion of the SEED grant work concludes, Ellis is working on ensuring Achampong has the resources she needs to continue to succeed in her work.

“It’s a gradual release of me listening to her, seeing how she’s incorporating the EDP into her program and reminding her that the tools are there,” Ellis said.

Despite the growth and support provided by their relationship, Ellis is confident Achampong’s momentum will not fade once they part ways.

“She pushes herself to continue to say what else can I do to make it better, to make the instruction better, to put things in place, to help students be the best they can be to be college and career ready,” Ellis added.

Ellis, proud of Achampong’s work and recognition, is eager to continue to channel the success of SciTech into her 10+ coaching relationships across both Pennsylvania and Mississippi.