Introduction

The Academic Vertical Alignment Training and Renewal (AVATAR) program was designed to engage the regional school systems in the State of Texas in vertical curriculum alignment processes. Funded by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), the AVATAR program was developed to provide a model of how to create sustainable networks that engage in both vertical and horizontal curriculum alignment through partnerships between secondary and postsecondary regional institutions. The goals of the AVATAR program include:

- Expanding awareness of vertical alignment initiatives within the region and beyond
- Identifying and implementing strategies to close secondary and post-secondary content and process curriculum gaps
- Understanding state standards and assessments that define secondary and post-secondary curriculum alignment
- Becoming knowledgeable about policies and procedures of secondary and post- secondary curriculum design and delivery, including an examination of course profiles
- Identifying processes to annually assess local progress toward closing the student achievement gaps between secondary and post-secondary
- Disseminating within peer groups, administrative leadership teams, p-16 councils, and other relevant groups information and findings from the secondary and post- secondary vertical alignment network sessions to maximize impact
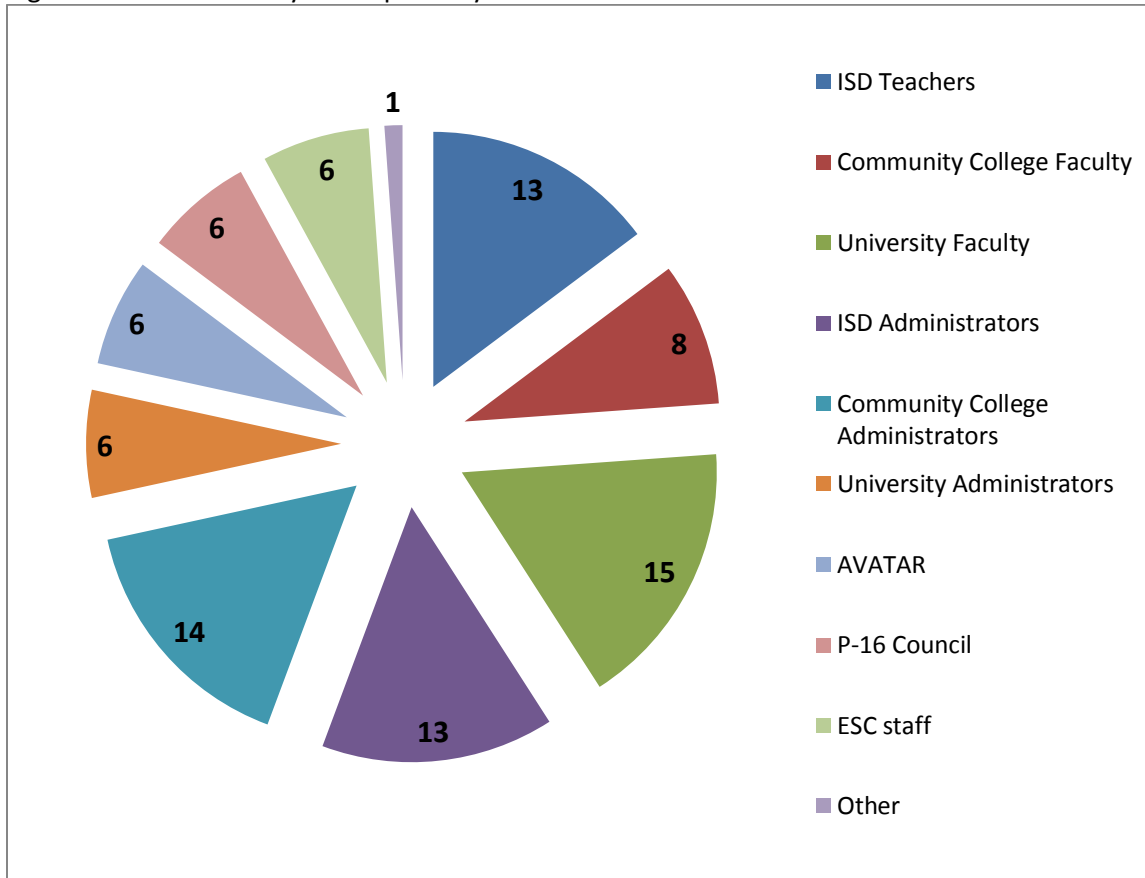
In the summer of 2012, AVATAR project directors developed a day-long information and training session for partners participating in the program to learn more about vertical alignment training (VAT) and how to implement VATs in their regions.   Shore Research, Inc. was charged with evaluating the (1) AVATAR training and (2) the implementation and effectiveness of vertical alignment efforts during the 2012-2013 school year. This report presents a summary of participant feedback from the AVATAR project summer training and information session held at the Region XI Education Service Center in Fort Worth.

Participants and Methods

All of the 129 AVATAR statewide regional partners were invited to the one-day training. Of those invited, 89 attended the event along with 7 additional guests. All attendees were asked to complete a survey that provided feedback about the quality and utility of the information presented and opinions regarding additional resources and support that the AVATAR staff could provide to assist the partners in developing their VATs. In all, 89 (93%) of the 96 attendees answered the survey.   All sectors of the regional partners were well represented in the survey results. Overall, 26 ISD participants, 22 community college and 21 university level participants provided feedback. With respect to job title, 36 teachers and faculty, 33 administrators responded to the survey.

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Figure 1. AVATAR Survey Participants by Role

Source: AVATAR Survey, August 2012

Because the regional partners are divided by ESC Region, the survey asked participants to report their regional affiliation. As with the data regarding AVATAR roles, there was broad representation from all ECS, with the largest number of participants in the Fort Worth region (XI) where the meeting was held. Each region had at least 3 attendees and Region XI-Ft. Worth had 11. The mode was 5.
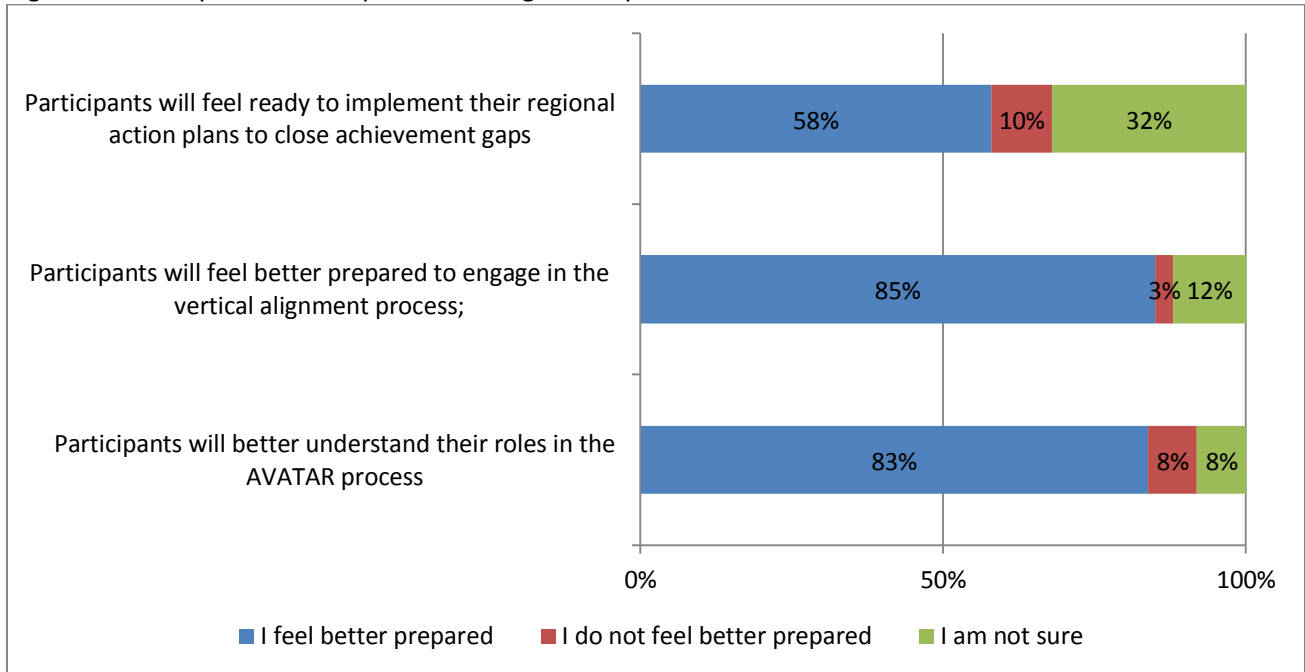
Findings

Participant Expectations.   In the survey, participants were asked about their expectations and what they hoped to get from the training. Nearly all wanted more information about AVATAR, what it was, what the goals were, what they were expected to do and how to accomplish it. Many participants stated that they wanted practical tools and advice about how to develop and conduct a VAT. The majority (79%) indicated that they had learned what they wanted to at the meeting, but 18% (n=15) were still uncertain and 3 said they did not.

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<u>AVATAR Meeting Goals</u>.   AVATAR staff set three overarching goals for the August meeting. These goals were:

1.   Participants will better understand their roles in the AVATAR process;

2.   Participants will feel better prepared to engage in the vertical alignment process; and

3.   Participants will feel ready to implement their regional action plans to close achievement gaps.

Figure 2. Participants' Self-Reported Feelings of Preparedness for AVATAR Work.
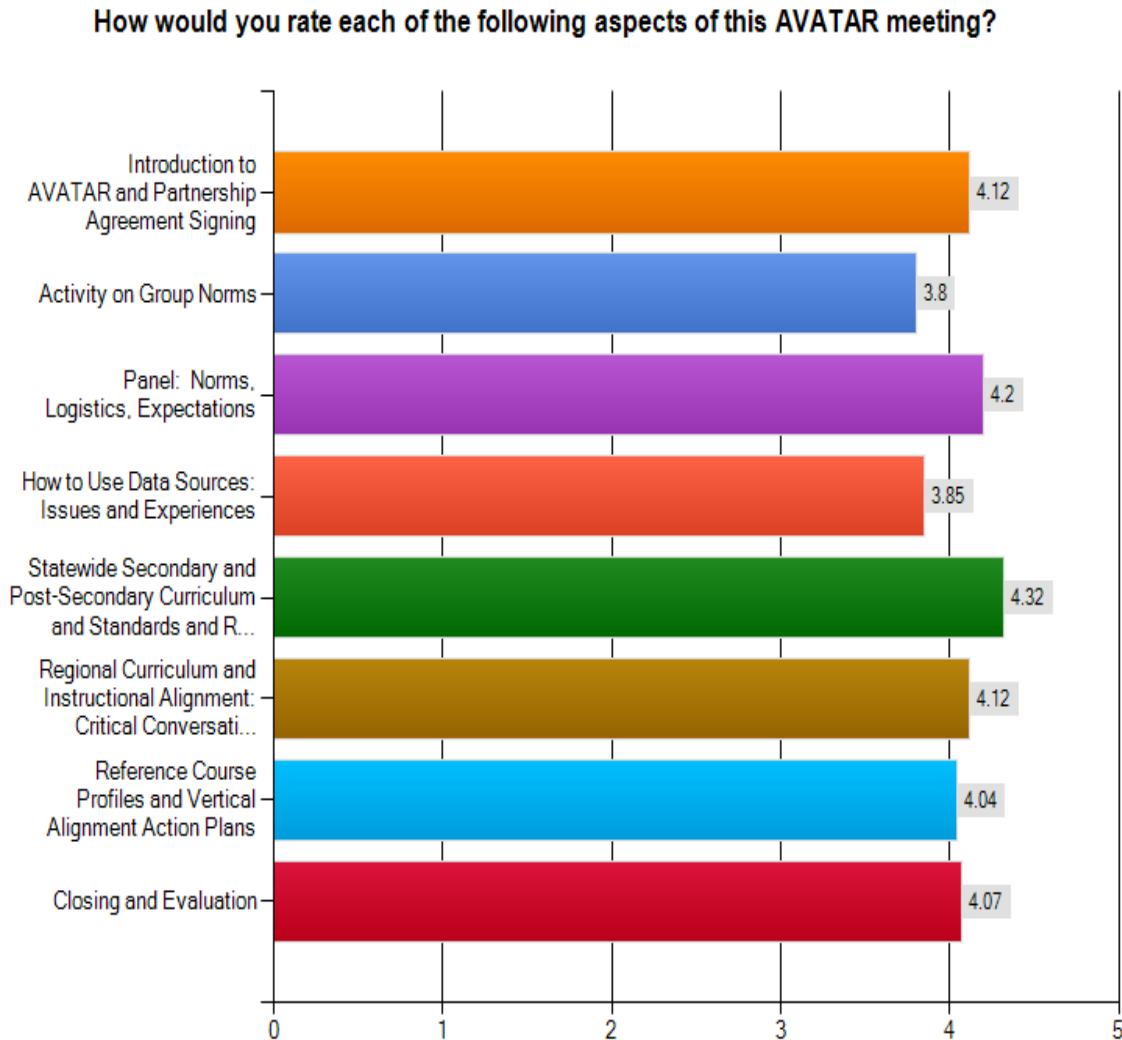

Source: AVATAR Survey, August 2012

In all, 83% of respondents felt they understood their role in AVATAR; 85% felt better prepared to engage in vertical alignment and 58% felt ready to implement their regional action plans (see Figure 2). Respondents were asked to provide insight into how the AVATAR team could help them feel more prepared or knowledgeable in these three areas. Of those who provided feedback, the most common answer was the need for an actual regional action plan (n=9 of 34 answers). Other common answers included the need for more information and more discussion with the AVATAR staff (n=5), more time in general (n=7), or to meet with their teams (n=4), more tools or resources (n=3) and more data (n=3).

<u>Opinions about the AVATAR Meeting.</u>   Participants also shared their overall rating for each of the 8 sessions presented that day. All of the sessions were rated by the majority of attendees as either good

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or excellent. "How to use data" and "Activity on group norms" were rated overall the lowest (slightly less than 4 on a 1-5 scale[1]), but were still generally highly rated (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Overall rating of AVATAR meeting quality by participants.

How would you rate each of the following aspects of this AVATAR meeting?
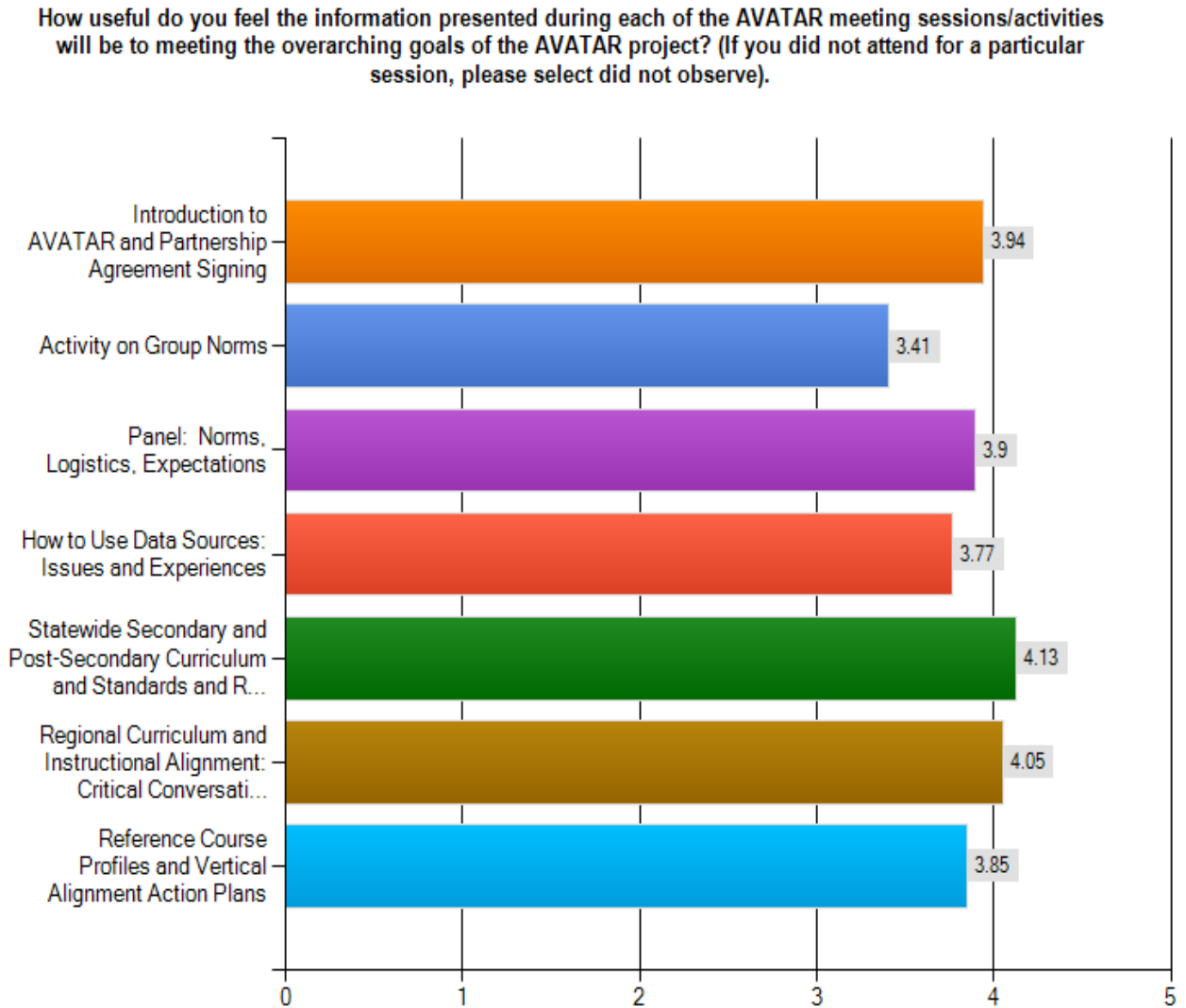

Source: AVATAR Survey, August 2012

Each session was also rated on its utility in regards to meeting the overall goals of the AVATAR project. Again, most sessions were rated as very or completely useful by the majority of participants, however there was more variation in the ratings as compared to participants' overall judgment (see Figure 4). Of the 7 sessions rated on this scale, only two received an overall rating that was higher than 4 (Statewide

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[1] Note: 1=not at all useful or very low quality 5=entirely useful or excellent quality.

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Secondary and Post-Secondary Curriculum and Standards and Related CCRS Assessments and Regional Curriculum and Instructional Alignment: Critical Conversations, Interventions and Benefits).

Figure 4. Rating of AVATAR meeting utility by participants.

How useful do you feel the information presented during each of the AVATAR meeting sessions/activities will be to meeting the overarching goals of the AVATAR project? (If you did not attend for a particular session, please select did not observe).

Source: AVATAR Survey, August 2012

Finally, respondents were asked to provide insights regarding the portions of the AVATAR meeting they found to be most and least useful. Although the 'how to use data session' was rated lower than most other sessions, by far participants stated that the portions of the program discussing data, its use and where to find it were the most welcome. Of the 68 responses to this item, 20 remarks were about data and its use. In addition 9 statements indicated that the conversations and discussions in general were useful, 9 stated that the sharing of best practices from those who have already begun the process were

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most useful, 7 stated that information about alignment/standards and similarities of k-12 and post-secondary work were the most welcome and 6 stated that the information about reference course alignment was the most useful.

Finally, participants were asked about what was least useful about the AVATAR meeting. Interestingly, of the 30 open-ended responses provided, 9 participants indicated that the data section was least useful. However, there was not consensus about whether that was because there was too much data presented, too little data or not the right data. In addition, 8 people said the norming activity was least useful. These statements do coincide with data in Figure 3 and 4, where the norming session and the data session were rated the lowest both overall and in terms of utility.

Recommendations

Overall, the AVATAR training and information session was well received. Participants thought the sessions were generally of a high quality; that they were able to learn a great deal about the vertical alignment process and their role in it; and many felt more informed about how to implement an action plan and rally their teams to move on with the work.   Participants indicated that they still need more information and time to meet with their teams and to develop and implement their plans. They felt that the AVATAR staff should provide additional support, more concrete resources, directions and tools and also provide more opportunities for different teams to share information and ask questions. Although participants rated the data sessions the lowest (however, they were still well-rated), they indicated that the information was quite welcome and desired more clarity about project specific data and its use.

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