

Supporting families as they raise their kids

By Michael Romain

“One of our goals this year was to find ways to reach out to parents in Austin and get them to join the table,” said Sara Anderson, a staff clinician at the Erikson Institute and the co-chair of the AECC’s Family Engagement Committee.

To that end, the AECC launched a partnership this year with Commu-

nity Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), an organization that has been turning everyday residents into grassroots leaders for 19 years.

“What made me realize the importance of early learning and [deep parental] engagement was when I started having children over 40 years ago,” said Gloria Harris, a parent peer trainer with COFI who is also a proud product

of the kind of training that other parents will undergo through the AECC/COFI partnership.

“I had 12 kids and they all went to early learning programs,” she said. “The brain works more actively between the ages of 0 to 5 than at any other time in a person’s life. If we can get kids to learn in positive social, mental and physical environments at young ages, then we may be able to lower the dropout rate.”

Between September and early October, the COFI/AECC collaboration will recruit and train approximately 30 parents – one group comprising 15-20 parents of infants, toddlers and preschoolers, and another group comprising 15-20 parents of children in grades K-3.

Since the AECC understands that not all Austin parents will be able to participate in this intense training, it also supports similar projects, namely the Erikson Institute’s Parent Cafes, from which many more

A cooking activity at Channing’s Childcare Academy.

DAVID PIERINI/Staff Photographer



parents, childcare providers, teachers, caregivers and other members of the community can benefit.

“Parent Cafes are a good way to bring parents together informally over a nice meal to talk about early childhood and gain support from professionals in the field,” Anderson said. The Parent Cafes are hosted by staff at the Erikson Institute and are held at DePriest

Eelmentary, 139 S. Parkside, from 8-9am on Mondays; and at Channing’s Childcare Academy, 5701 W. Division, from 4-5pm on Tuesdays. They are informal weekly drop-in sessions in which parents can share a meal, talk about challenges and victories in their parenting, and get feedback and information from professionals in the field of early childhood.