

## 2,300 Teachers Attend Convocation, Learn How to Deal With Cyberspace and Relationships

Contributed by Tobie Baker  
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Education attorney Jim Keith of Adams and Reese in Jackson, addresses an estimated 2,300 north Mississippi school teachers Monday on cyberbullying and other inappropriate uses of the Internet between educators and students as part of a half-day, back-to-school convocation at the University of Mississippi. UM photo by Kevin Bain.

OXFORD, Miss. -- The Internet is a useful tool, much like a knife. Yet, both can also be deadly.

That was the message delivered to an estimated 2,300 teachers from across north Mississippi Monday morning at the University of Mississippi.

The half-day, back-to-school convocation was packed with sobering messages about cybercrime, cyberbullying and inappropriate relationships between educators and students through the use of technology.

"I learned a lot today," said Trenisha Weekley, a sixth-grade reading teacher at Water Valley's Davidson Elementary. "I learned that I have to be careful with students. I have to stay professional while teaching."

Speaker Chris Michaelson, an FBI special agent, posed the issue with this scenario: "Who would give a child a pornographic magazine sealed in a brown envelope, send them off to school with it and tell them not to open it?" he asked. "The same stuff is just a simple click away on the Internet."

According to Michaelson, more than two-thirds of all sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders admit to seeing photos of naked people on the Internet, and of the 24 million children who use the Internet, one in five are solicited for sex, according to some statistics. Use of the Internet, he said, must be addressed by both families and school officials.

"There's a basic safety to [be learned] using the Internet," Michaelson said. "We should teach our children to be street smart, even in cyberspace. And monitor your children's Internet activity closely. You're not spying; you're doing your job."

An estimated 2,300 teachers from across north Mississippi attended a half-day, back-to-school convocation at UM on cyberbullying and other inappropriate uses of the Internet between educators and students. UM photo by Kevin Bain.

Cannon Allen of the Jackson law firm Adams and Reese told the teachers that cyberbullying is a danger inside and

outside of the schoolhouse. Since 1998, Allen said nine students, ranging in age from 13 to 18, have committed suicide as a result of cyberbullying. Much of the bullying comes in the form of text messaging.

"More than a third of school kids report being victims of cyberbullying," Allen said. "Through this technology, children are vulnerable 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Cyberbullying is a significant ongoing problem that schools cannot immunize themselves against."

Allen's colleague Jim Keith, a 26-year education attorney, addressed the inappropriate use of technology between educators and students, saying that teachers should never give out their personal contact information to students.

"There's really no reason for educators to text their students," he said. "If you need to remind them of a class assignment or cancel practice for a school play, there are other technologies available that can be used to communicate with your students."

Keith also presented the teachers with warning signs of inappropriate behavior, including rumors, unprofessional conduct, changes in a student's personality and teachers who spend a questionable amount of time with students.

"We want teachers to give our students attention and provide them with support and understanding, but there's a fine line that we can't cross," Keith said. "You know it when you see it, and as teachers, you are the eyes for the administration. You need to report the red flags."

"Times are changing," Weekley admitted. "My students have cell phones, and texting is very popular. But I see now it can also be dangerous. I have to teach my students that."

A school resource officer attending the convocation said that he has witnessed cyberbullying and inappropriate student/teacher relations. "It's a common thing," he said.

The convocation, sponsored by the North Mississippi Education Consortium and UM's School of Education, was even eye-opening for him, he said. "I didn't realize that social networking sites so common today included all of the personal information, like phone numbers and addresses. We have to take better precautions and protect our students."

The consortium is a partnership among 43 north Mississippi public school districts, three community colleges and the UM School of Education. Its purpose is to assure quality educational programs through cooperative efforts and shared resources.

For more information about the consortium, visit <http://www.nmec.net/>. To learn more about the School of Education, visit [http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/educ\\_school2/](http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/educ_school2/).

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Watch video from the back-to-school convocation