



By ELLY GRIMM

• Leader & Times

Statistics show that every 26 seconds, a student drops out of school and into an uncertain future. The Communities in Schools (CIS) at Liberal High School is looking to help change that by participating in the world's largest graduation procession online as part of CIS's Change the Picture campaign.

The campaign began Thursday, and seniors will be able to participate in this project by taking selfies of themselves in their graduation caps and gowns, uploading them to social media and then using the hashtag #classofchange.

"It's a fun challenge for them and also a celebration and something cool to say that...one day if people ask 'what's something I wouldn't know about you?' or 'what's something interesting about you?' I think it would be a cool thing to answer 'I was part of the world's biggest graduation procession with the class of 2014.' They'll be like 'how so?' and then you can tell them about this," Denae Weber, the CIS coordinator at Liberal High School, said.

Change the Picture is a national campaign about students who have stories and obstacles and who have overcome them throughout middle school and high school who are graduating. The mission of CIS is to have students graduate to lower the dropout percentage.

“It’s on billboards clear across the nation and actually there’s a girl from Ottawa High School out of eight people, out of the whole country, she was one of them that is on billboards all over, like in Times Square and everywhere so it’s really cool,” Weber said. “We there’ll be commercials on TV soon so you might be seeing them.”

Weber also added that this is the first year that the CIS organization is attempting such a feat.

“I’m kind of excited to see how many thousands upon thousands because it’s as easy and simple as a click with a selfie and hashtag,” she said. “With younger students and people, they’re able to do the electronic stuff a little easier than some of us older generation.”

CIS’s mission statement also talked about this undertaking.

“They will collectively reach this momentous goal and send a message that together, we are changing the picture of education in America,” the statement says. “We are encouraging both communities and school students and graduates at large to take part.”

The deadline for submitting graduation photos is June 30 and the full gallery of photos submitted will be available at facebook.com/communitiesinschools or CIS’s website at communitiesinschools.org/classofchange.

“With our mission statement and what we’re here to do and what we are striving for is to keep kids in school so the mission is simple,” Weber said. “We surround the students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life, working closely with educators, community leaders and an army of volunteers.”

More than three decades ago, CIS began by helping 100 students in Atlanta – today the CIS network of nearly 5,000 professionals and 50,000 volunteers operates in more than 2,200 schools in the most challenged communities of 26 states and the District of Columbia and serves 1.3 million students and their families every year..

“This is a fun campaign and challenge to prove how we are making a difference with students’ education and their lives,” □ Weber said.