

# Puerto Rican students travel long way to get to school in Florida

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Mizraim Ruiz Collazo (left), 14, looks on as his sister, Samiliz Ruiz Collazo (center), 10, hugs their grandmother, Beatriz Rodriguez, when they arrived at the Sanford, Florida, airport from Puerto Rico on October 13, 2017. Photo from Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel/TNS

Samiliz Ruiz Collazo is 10 years old and her brother, Mizraim, is 14. The siblings are from Puerto Rico. Last Friday, they took a plane to Orlando, Florida. They met their grandmother at the airport and gave her a hug. Both kids looked tired after their trip.

"I don't remember what that looked like," Samiliz said. She pointed to one of the bright lights over the baggage claim area. At night, their home in Puerto Rico has been without power for nearly a month.



Puerto Rico is an island. It is a part of the United States and its residents are American. More than 3 million people live there. On September 20, a big storm named Hurricane Maria hit the island. It was one of the worst storms in Puerto Rico's history.

The children spent the early hours of that day hiding from the hurricane's winds. They hid in the bathroom of their home.

### **Puerto Rico Still Recovering From Storm**

The storm hit Puerto Rico hard. It toppled the water tank and ripped off part of the roof. The family had no power or water and limited phone service. Their mother, Brenda Collazo, doesn't have a job. Their father, Samuel Ruiz, works at a nearby supermarket. That job is now uncertain, though. Deliveries to the area have been halted for weeks.

Brenda and Samuel decided to send their children to their grandmother in Florida.

Rodriguez lives in Central Florida. She moved from Puerto Rico three years ago. Her home has a spacious backyard. She grows chile peppers, peas and Spanish limes. Another hurricane, named Irma, hit Florida earlier in September. Rodriguez's house was not damaged by it.

## **Two Months Or More At Abuela's House**

Rodriguez wanted the children to feel welcome. She bought two cases of Malta India, a popular soft drink in Puerto Rico. She arranged two bedrooms for her grandchildren. The kids will join other displaced Puerto Rican students and attend a school nearby.

"They can be one month, two months without their parents," Rodriguez said. "Because they're used to spending summers with me."

Rodriguez said the children's parents are making plans to visit for Thanksgiving or Christmas. But back in Puerto Rico, Brenda admits she is still worried. She struggles to get enough food and drinking water.

Michelle Collazo is Brenda's older sister. She has lived in Central Florida for almost 20 years.

"Brenda called me yesterday and said, 'Let me know if you hear of any jobs,' Michelle said. "This is the first time she's asked. I think she's starting to think, 'I have to go.'"

The third Collazo sister, Beatriz, lives in Puerto Rico. She thought about sending her daughters to Florida, too. They both attend a private school on the island. It reopened last week.

## **Students Need To Get Back To Classrooms**

The Collazo family's strong ties to Central Florida are not unusual. Schools all over Florida are getting ready to receive hundreds of Puerto Rican students. It's a choice many island parents are making for their children. In Central Florida schools, over 400 Puerto Rico students enrolled just last week.





Meanwhile, in Puerto Rico, education officials are working hard. Only 167 schools out of more than 1,000 are open. Julia Keleher runs the education department there. She said some parents are not ready to send their children back to school. Others do not want their kids to lose any more class time. The department tries to strike a balance. They hope to reopen more schools on October 23.

Keleher has been talking with officials on the United States mainland. They want the Puerto Rican children to have support during this difficult time.

## Settling In

For now, families like the Collazos try to help the children settle in. They depend on familiar things.

At Rodriguez's home, a piano keyboard sits in a bedroom. It's the one that Samiliz plays when she visits. It's where she left it last summer.

"My husband was going to send it to her," said Rodriguez. "But now, look how things happen."