

Puerto Rico's students travel to Florida to resume school year

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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 and her brother Mizraim are from Puerto Rico. Samiliz is 10 years old. Mizraim is 14. Last Friday, they took a plane to Orlando, Florida. They met their grandmother at the airport. The brother and sister will be living with their grandmother for a while.

"I don't remember what that looked like," Samiliz said. She pointed to a light in the airport. Their home in Puerto Rico hasn't had power for nearly a month.



Puerto Rico is a small island in the Atlantic Ocean. It is not a state, but it is part of the United States. It is called a U.S. territory. It is home to more than 3 million people.

Hurricane Maria Topples Puerto Rico

In September, a powerful storm hit the island. Its name was Hurricane Maria. It was one of the worst storms in Puerto Rico's history. The wind and water knocked out power across Puerto Rico and destroyed many homes and buildings. Phone and Internet service were largely knocked out, too.

The children spent the storm hiding from the strong winds. They hid in the bathroom of their home.

The storm toppled their water tank. It ripped off part of the roof. The family has no power or water. They have limited phone service. Their mother, Brenda Collazo, doesn't have a job. Their father, Samuel Ruiz, works at a nearby supermarket. That job is uncertain now, though. Grocery deliveries have been stopped for weeks.

A Stay With Grandma

That is why Brenda and Samuel decided to send their children to Florida. They will stay with their grandmother, Beatriz Rodriguez, until it is safe to return home.

Rodriguez is also from Puerto Rico. She moved to Florida three years ago. Her home has a big backyard. She wanted the children to feel welcome. She bought two cases of a soft drink that is popular in Puerto Rico. She arranged two bedrooms for Samiliz and Mizraim. The kids will go to a nearby school.

"They are used to spending summers with me," Rodriguez said. She said she feels "pretty calm" about this change for the kids. Their parents, Brenda and Samuel, are planning to visit for Thanksgiving or Christmas.



Michelle Collazo is Brenda's older sister. She lives in Florida, too. She says Brenda asked to know about jobs in the area. Michelle said her sister may decide to leave Puerto Rico.

Beatriz is the third Collazo sister. She still lives in Puerto Rico. Beatriz thought about sending her daughters to Florida, too, but their school reopened last week.

Mainland Schools Open For Puerto Rican Students

The Collazo family's strong ties to Florida are not unusual. Florida is getting ready for hundreds of Puerto Rican students to arrive. More than 400 enrolled in Central Florida schools just last week.

Back in Puerto Rico, school officials are working hard. The island has more than 1000 schools. Only 167 of them are open. The officials hope to reopen more schools on October 23.

For now, schools on the mainland are stepping up to help. And families like the Collazos are helping the children settle in.

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

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