

# Students still deal with Hurricane Maria's effects in Puerto Rico

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Julio Ortiz (left) watches his father, Ángel Ortiz start a generator at sunset. Their house in Punta Santiago, Puerto Rico, was flooded chest high and the family barely escaped. They are now sleeping in a tent in the driveway because the house is infested by mold and mosquitoes. Photo by: Washington Post by Sarah L. Voisin

HUMACAO, Puerto Rico - Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico in September. People there are still feeling the effects of the storm, as many homes and schools have no electricity.

On a warm morning in January, Neida Ortiz Torres awoke in a tent outside her house. She is 17 years old. Her brother Julio is 7 years old. Their family's home is full of mold and mosquitoes.

## **Dealing With Loss**

Neida went inside to get ready for school in the dark, using the glow of her cellphone. Then, she went to the bus stop, past wreckage and a spot where a desperate neighbor had painted a request for water and food. She made her way to her high school. It is still dealing with losses of power and water sometimes.

Neida and her brother Julio lost so much when Hurricane Maria struck. They lost clothing, schoolwork, books and Neida's drawings. Then, after the flooding stopped, they missed weeks of school. Julio returned to class in late October and Neida returned in mid November. In other parts of the island, children returned in December, missing nearly three months of school.

Even then, things were far from normal. Julio's school still has no power. Neida's English teacher left the island after the storm and was not replaced for weeks.

"Why can't I have my life back?" Neida asked.

## **Island's Education Department Feels Effects**

Puerto Rico is part of the U.S. even though it is not a state. Hurricane Maria damaged one of largest and poorest school systems in the United States. The island's education department has decided to close 21 schools. The buildings had damage or were short of students.

Of the schools that remained open, nearly one-third had no power. More than 25,000 students have left the island, many without their parents. They hoped to find more stable schooling in the continental United States. Nearly 200 teachers also left. This has been difficult for Puerto Rico because schools did not have enough teachers even before the storm. Now, many students are left alone during parts of the school day.

Teachers struggle to get what they need. They spend their own money on air conditioners and on food when schools run out of it.

After the storm, teachers across the island were called to schools to clear mud and wreckage.

Some went to Julio's school and got help from firefighters and others in making repairs.

## **Severe Damage To Classrooms**

Sonia Vázquez, a kindergarten teacher, cried when she opened the door to her classroom. The educational toys, the books and the worksheets all were ruined. Mold had begun to form, and rust was eating into the legs of the chairs and tables.

Some parents showed up at the school, asking when it would reopen. Other students told Vázquez that they planned to leave the storm-damaged island. Eight of her 22 students left for the continental United States, and five more ended up elsewhere on the island.

Similar scenes happened across Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico is having the longest power outage in modern U.S. history. The lights remain off at hundreds of schools. Students often gather near windows so they can get enough light to read.

To print out worksheets, teachers haul computers and printers to a nearby Burger King. It is one of the few spots with electricity and WiFi.

In Julio's dim classroom, doors and windows must be open to let in sunlight and air, but noise and mosquitoes come in, too. His teacher, Sonya Rosario, used poster boards for a story about a boy who got a model train. Then she had the children crowd around a pre-charged laptop to watch a video.

## **Fearful Students Learn About Hurricanes**

School has not been easy for students since the storm hit. Many students are feeling a great deal of stress. Some grow fearful when it rains and have difficulty focusing. Teachers have helped students learn the science behind hurricanes.

One high school has students work on a guide about handling a natural disaster, using their own knowledge.

"When it rains, they get anxious the school will flood," Vázquez said. "You have to calm them."