Migrant students make their annual journey to new schools

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.18.14

Claudia Morales, 13, (second from left) jokes with her friends and Juan Alcantar, (right) Pajaro Valley school district migrant counselor, as they wait for a school bus at a migrant laborers camp where Morales lives in Watsonville, California, Nov. 19, 2014. Photo: AP/Marcio Jose Sanchez

WATSONVILLE, Calif. — Claudia Morales is an expert in packing — she's been moving around her whole life. She knows she must start packing early because her room is always a mess.

Claudia packs her clothes and hoodies in her suitcase, but she dumps all her schoolwork in the trash. In a week she'll have new notebooks, new textbooks, and a new school 200 miles away.

Claudia does this every year. In fact, she does it twice a year.

She's not alone. This December, thousands of children are making their yearly journey to new schools in California. They are the children of migrant farmworkers.

Claudia's parents work in the fields, planting and picking fruits and vegetables. Because fruits and vegetables grow at certain times of the year, farmworkers often move around to where the work is. It is known as seasonal work.
At Risk Of Dropping Out

In California, seasonal farmworkers live in labor camps during growing season. The camps offer low-cost housing. But when the work is over, the farmworkers have to leave. Under California law, families must move at least 50 miles away when the camps close for the winter.

"I like both places," Claudia said. "But when I grow up I expect to have good work and buy a house where we can stay permanently."

Claudia gets straight A's at one school, and lower grades at the other. Still, as Claudia gets older and her classes get more difficult, she is more at risk of dropping out.

Ninety percent of migrant children eventually drop out of school, according to human rights group Human Agenda.

Juan Alcantar is a guidance counselor at Aptos Junior High School, where Claudia started eighth grade this fall. He offers advice to the children of migrant farmworkers.

Alcantar says he has a handful of students who are failing every class.

"They see themselves as visitors on this campus," he said. "They figure, 'I come from a labor camp next to a dump site. I don't belong, and I'm leaving soon."

"A Largely Invisible Population"

For Claudia, the cycle continues. Her labor camp is less than an hour drive south of Silicon Valley. The region has transformed from fruit orchards and vegetable fields to a global technology hub, with companies like Google, Facebook and Apple there.

"This is a largely invisible population, but we all should care a whole lot about this," said Stanford University professor Amado Padilla, who studies immigration. "Kids who don't finish school end up being a burden on society. On the flip side, kids who are well-educated end up being the caregivers both personally and economically of the older generation."

California has 24 seasonal farmworker centers, 1,900 apartments all together. The program began in the 1930s, when the government opened migrant labor camps for Dust Bowl refugees — poor migrants coming to California to escape a severe drought in the Great Plains.

The idea behind the 50-mile rule was to provide seasonal housing for families who come to an area to work only during picking season.

There are far fewer migrating farmworker families today than 10 years ago. Still, state officials say that seasonal housing should not be lived in year-round because it would make housing unavailable for the next season's pickers and planters.
"We are not aware of members of families being in jams or having a problem with having to move away," said Guerdon Stuckey, of the California Department of Housing and Community Development. He said some families are not looking for permanent housing.

**Overlooking A Dump**

The labor camp where Claudia’s family lives is 50 basic houses built in the late 1960s from Styrofoam and plywood.

Claudia’s bedroom window overlooks a small valley, a jail and a dump. The rent for the house is about $350 a month — a lot for Claudia’s dad, who made $9.50 an hour planting strawberries in November.

Claudia’s father Juan Morales — wearing a large straw hat — joked with nearby planters, all bent at the waist, as loud music blared over the field. But he got serious when asked if Claudia, her brother Jose, 7, and sister Maria, 16, will ever join him. Under state law, the children can start working in the fields at age 13.

"I want them to get a good education, I don't want them working here," he said.

"They take the pain for us," Claudia said of her parents’ work in the fields.

This fall, Claudia started school riding a bus with other labor camp kids to Aptos Junior High, a school in a rich community. After Thanksgiving she moved to Palo Verde Union School in Tulare, a school in a low-income community.

**Now Studying Chemistry**

In the Tulare labor camp, Claudia knows just about everybody.

Her family shares one room of a mobile home in a dangerous neighborhood. Claudia does not go out at night, but she still likes it there.

In Tulare, the science class was studying chemistry. At Aptos, she had studied physics.

"Who remembers what a molecule is?" asked teacher Kevin Meneses on Claudia’s first day. "If I have two or more of a different type of atom stuck together, what do I have?"

Hands went up. Students called out. Claudia was silent.

"I just listen, I write it down, but I don't raise my hand because I have no idea what they're asking about," she said, shrugging. "I just sit there."
Quiz

1 In the section "At Risk Of Dropping Out," which paragraph gives more information about why so many migrant worker children leave school?

2 Which is the BEST description of the article’s central idea?
   (A) In California, migrant farm workers must move 50 miles from the state sponsored labor camps which means that their children frequently must leave in the middle of the school year.
   (B) The 50 mile rule in California affects migrant farmworker children who must change schools twice a year.
   (C) In California, the seasonality of migrant farm work, the 50 mile rule and the need to change schools during the school year combine to increase the dropout rate among farmworker children.
   (D) Migrant farmworkers must follow the availability of work which means their children change schools during the year.

3 Which details from the article reveal information about Claudia Morales?
   (A) "They figure, 'I come from a labor camp next to a dump site. I don't belong, and I'm leaving soon.'"
   (B) Claudia gets straight A’s at one school, and lower grades at the other. Still, as Claudia gets older and her classes get more difficult, she is more at risk of dropping out.
   (C) "This is a largely invisible population, but we all should care a whole lot about this," said Stanford University professor Amado Padilla, who studies immigration.
   (D) The labor camp where Claudia’s family lives is 50 basic houses built in the late 1960s from Styrofoam and plywood.

4 According to the article, what is one of the possible effective ways to decrease the dropout rate of farmworker children?
   (A) repeal the law that requires the families to move at least 50 miles from the seasonal housing
   (B) improve the schools that they attend
   (C) offer special incentives to keep farmworker children in school
   (D) provide better housing so they don’t have to move
Answer Key

1. In the section "At Risk Of Dropping Out," which paragraph gives more information about why so many migrant worker children leave school?

   Paragraph 7: Claudia gets straight A's at one school, and lower grades at the other. Still, as Claudia gets older and her classes get more difficult, she is more at risk of dropping out.

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