



Clipperton Island students baffle administrators

During the 2009-10 school year, the Lee County School District registered 904 new students who came directly from 70 foreign countries and territories. Sure, the nations you'd expect — Haiti, Mexico and Guatemala — led the way. But one territory caught my eye: two children moved here from Clipperton Island, district records show. I'd never heard of it, but sure enough, Clipperton Island is out there... way out there.

According to the CIA, which maintains information on all political entities, Clipperton Island is 700 miles southwest of Mexico, a French possession smack dab in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. It consists of a ring of sand and coral that surrounds a lagoon. That's it. Clipperton has no roads, no electricity, no running water, no economy and — here's the kicker — no inhabitants, the CIA reports. And it hasn't had any permanent inhabitants since 1945, save for a few shipwreck victims here and there.



When new students enroll in Lee schools, families are supposed to furnish an original birth certificate, passport or baptismal record to verify their age and nationality. So, how do you explain two new students claiming they're from an uninhabited island?

"Whatever they bring as a document, we use," said Leila Muvdi, Lee's director of student assignment. "Most likely they had a document saying they were from the island or born there."

The Florida Department of Education maintains a list of 291 countries, territories and possessions, each with a two-letter code, that public schools use to track students' origins. Clipperton Island's code is CN (why the state maintains a country code for an uninhabited island, I don't know). One administrator offered a reasonable explanation for the Clipperton students:

"Somebody could have hit the wrong key," said Mike Smith, director of planning and school growth. "You can't be 100 percent accurate with every piece of paper those folks deal with."

Looking at the keyboard, whomever inputted the data could have missed the target and accidentally hit CN instead of one of the four letters that surrounds the N: CB (Cambodia), CH (China), CJ (Caymen Islands) or CM (Cameroon).

But who knows? Perhaps one of the shipwreck victims gave birth on Clipperton Island and the French government issued a passport reflecting that.

In any case, if you know the two students from Clipperton Island (Clippertonians?), please have them give me a call. I'd like to know how they ended up here.

