



Chris Ayres (3)

# Going “Up” to School

Some island commuters start at an early age

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**I**t's a miserable day for a boat ride. At 7:15 a.m., it's dark, cold and threatening to snow. Clouds cast a gray pallor on the water and Peaks Island's bare trees, a grimness mirrored by the industrial gray of Fort Gorges and Portland's waterfront, even the battleship gray of the Casco Bay Lines ferry MACHIGONNE II.

With the precarious timing of the young, a group of seventh graders rounds the corner just as the boat pulls into the Peaks Island dock. Oblivious to the weather, the kids join others already lined up at the dock, wearing oversized backpacks and mingling with the nine-to-fivers in suits and heels, house painters carrying thermoses, teenagers with green hair and pierced faces. The ferry, with a capacity of 350, has standing room only, and kids are shouting at each other about homework, basketball practice and what was on TV last night.

Four of the islands in Casco Bay have elementary schools, for children in kindergarten through fifth grade. When the children reach sixth grade—a tender age for some—they head off-island to school. Chebeague Island kids go to Cumberland schools, while students from Cliff, Peaks and Long head to Portland, to King Middle School, then Portland High.

Going off-island for school is common for Maine's island residents, but in Casco Bay, the contrast between the island setting and big-city mainland schools is particularly stark. The children who make the crossing two times a day, five days a week, go from one-room and two-room schoolhouses into the largest, most cosmopolitan city in the state, a place where most of them have never visited without a parent.

“It's a major jump from the elementary school sector to the middle school sector,” says Miriam Remar, director of elementary and secondary education

for the Portland Public Schools. The kids are at an age, 11 and 12, when they are also negotiating jumps from childhood to adolescence and from dependence on their parents and families to independence. Going to a new larger school requires them to switch teachers and classroom for every subject, adding to the difficulty.

While there are always transitional issues for this age group, the issues are compounded for the island children. When they make the transition to sixth grade, they go “up to Portland” from a small town where everyone knows everybody, to the noise, traffic and crowds of the city.

“Here, they've had me for three years,” says Paula Johnson, one of the two teachers at the Long Island elementary school. On Cliff Island, which has a one-room schoolhouse, the students have one teacher for six years. Still, commuting to Portland serves as a bridge between island and city, and may help with the child's other transitions as well.

Children gain confidence and self-reliance as they learn to navigate streets, pay phones and public transportation. “In fifth grade, if I had the choice to come ‘up’ by myself, I probably wouldn't have,” says Tonya Mulkern, a seventh grader from Peaks Island. “But now if I had the choice, I probably would, because I know the area better.” After sixth grade, most island kids make the trip on weekends and vacations with peers rather than parents.

On the MACHIGONNE II, Aaron Schuit and Isaiah Oliver, both seventh graders, climb the stairs to the second deck. “This is where our friends sit,” explains Aaron, who is dark-haired and serious. “The kids who horse around hang out downstairs. Upstairs is quieter.”

He and Isaiah take the 7:15 boat, except on days they have morning basketball practice; then they take the 6:15. A school bus meets them at the terminal, then brings them back for the 3:15 p.m. boat at the end of the day. If they have sports, clubs, or friends to visit after school, they walk to the terminal and take a later boat home.

The worst part of the commute is having to get up so early. “I used to just roll out of bed and into the school,” says Aaron. While the logistics of commuting doesn't seem to bother these kids, getting them from the islands into King and Portland High is so complicated that hardly anyone seems to know exactly how it's done. Other than the children, the only ones who really know what's going on are the transporters—the bus drivers and boat crews who move them to and from the islands every day and make sure they get to school on time.

The boat pulls up to the terminal, and Isaiah and Aaron put on their packs and start down the stairs. Before going to King, Aaron had never gone into town by himself. Isaiah, taller and with sandy blond hair, used to do it “sometimes.” But now they go almost every weekend. Today the boys have a deliberate non-

chance, but one can imagine them as 11-year-olds, smaller, more timid, making the initial crossing. "The first day, all the kids from the island stuck together," says Aaron.

The school kids shoot off the boat and into the parking lot, where several yellow buses are idling. "Bus 17 is the one that the middle school kids get on," says Tonya Mulkern. The bus comes to a halt in front of the school, and the kids run off to find their in-town friends, who are tumbling out of other buses. Like Tonya, the other island kids enjoy parts of Portland, but would never, ever want to live in the city. One Portland

The kids say "hi" to the deckhands and settle into their seats, the middle-schoolers under the stairs, the high-schoolers by the doorway. Less than a hundred people ride this boat, and they all seem to know each other by sight. Less anonymous here, the kids seem more sedate than those who take the Peaks ferry. Then again, they may simply be tired.

"It's a long day," says Terra Parker, a freckle-faced sixth grader from Long Island. "You get up at five and you don't get back till seven if you have activities, and then you have to do your homework. But like the Peaks students, these

thing as simple as a visit with in-town friends seems daunting. But Terra's eighth grade sister, who has mellow red hair and a sophisticated manner, says, "It's not that hard."

On the day-to-day level, King Middle School teacher Karen MacDonald says, "One of the things that can be difficult is doing extracurricular activities. And that's really part of middle school." Long Island teacher and parent Paula Johnson points out that something as minor as a five-minute detention can throw off the whole delicate schedule of buses, boats and carpools. And unlike Peaks kids, who will wait no more than

an hour for the next boat, "If the kids miss that boat at 2:45 p.m., they're stuck in Portland till 5:45 p.m. They wouldn't know what to do with themselves for three hours. And the parents wouldn't know why they didn't show up." Johnson has arrangements with the King teachers for kids to serve minor detentions at the island school, to help with this problem.

"Missing the bus is the kids' biggest worry," Johnson says. A parents club used to give watches to the graduating fifth-grade class, until they started showing up with them on their own. Now, those with digital watches like to set them to beep at 2:25 p.m., when the school bus leaves for the terminal. If they miss it, they have to

walk 35 minutes through downtown Portland, then wait for the late boat by themselves.

Facing school in Portland, island kids worry about noise, crowds, and the school cafeteria. Sitting in her classroom at the island school, Paula Johnson says, "That's what they are afraid of. They don't know how they're going to get their food." She points to the 10 desks, arranged in a cozy horseshoe. "Here, we all eat at our desks." Her daughter Moira, who's at King now, says the cafeteria, "was strange at first. It's so loud; the kids all walk around."

On the boat, the girls elaborate on



girl, who likes to visit her friends on the island, says, "It's better out there." Her island friend, in a green coat and purple earmuffs, says, "You can stay out later," and the Portland girl adds, "It's not like Crime City."

By 2:45 p.m. a veneer of snow, the first of the year, covers the city. At the ferry terminal, the children scramble off the school buses and head for the benches on the dock. A couple of them go straight into the MAQUOIT II, which is waiting to take them to Great Diamond, Long, Chebeague, and, finally, Cliff, a whopping hour and fifteen minutes away.

kids are hardly fazed by the commute. Terra says, "The boat—it's really good—they have tables so we can do our homework." This year she played field hockey, along with her older sister, Billie, and her island friend, Moira Johnson. On practice days, the girls missed the bus and had to find another way to the boat. "We found a ride," says Terra matter-of-factly. "We didn't pay him. We gave him lobsters instead. He was our godmother's cousin."

While the Peaks ferry runs almost hourly from early morning to late at night, the boats to the outer islands are few and far between. Scheduling some-

the differences between the island and city schools. "On the island, the biggest grade has five or six people," says Billie Parker. "Some grades only have one or two," and the school has 20 students total. "At King," her sister Terra says, "There are hundreds of kids just in your grade." Both girls say they were "wicked nervous" on the first day of sixth grade, and Terra, who has only been commuting for three months, can still remember her first bus ride through the streets of Portland. When she tried to visualize the return trip, she felt overwhelmed. "It looked like a 'wrong way' from school. I thought if I ever missed the bus, I'd never find my way."

The boat slows down at Great Diamond, where today there is a lone passenger getting off: a girl wrapped in red pants, blue windbreaker and pink mittens. "She's a third grader," says Sam, another Long Islander. Diamond has no school, he explains, so she goes to Longfellow Elementary in Portland. She makes her way to the ramp, teetering a bit under the weight of her purple backpack and the roll of the boat. There's no school bus driver here to make sure she gets off at the right place. What if she misses her stop? "She won't," says Skyler, who's sitting next to Sam. "It's a feeling." He unplugs his Walkman from his ears. "Dude, you can fall asleep on this thing. I can tell when it slows down; only at Cliff, though."

Two students come over from Cliff Island. "There's me and my older brother," Skyler says. Of all the student commuters, they are the first to leave in the morning (6:15 a.m.) and the last to get home (4 p.m.). It's no wonder that "Sky," who is 12-going-on-40, says all he does on the boat is "Sleep—that's all there is to do."

"Transition is something we've worked on," says Long Island teacher Paula Johnson. She preps her students by taking them on lots of field trips into the city. "And when we're in there, we go for the day," she says. "That

gets them used to being around other places."

Still, says Johnson, "transition is really hard. I'll hear it from the parents in the summer about how frantic their kids are." King sends a school map to incoming students, and one of Johnson's recent fifth graders spent the summer memorizing it.

"One thing that's made the transition easier is the crew of the boat," says Johnson. "They really look out for the kids." On Moira's first day, she was the only sixth grader, and the school had to arrange special transportation for her. When the bus didn't show up in Port-



land, the captain of the ferry called the school to get someone to come down and pick her up.

Like Remar, of the school department, Dudley Coyne, King assistant principal, explains that all sixth graders are anxious about going to middle school. And though the "down the bay" students and their parents are especially apprehensive, he says, "It seems to go away in the first couple of days of school. It's amazing how they get over it."

At the Long Island dock, Billie and Terra get a ride from their dad, while Sam, Moira and Darlene, freshmen at Portland High, walk up the street, wav-

ing at cars, yelling out to pedestrians. When she first started going, Moira says, Portland seemed "scary and strange." But now she's "sort of glad to be going off-island for school. It's a change. You feel older and you get to meet different people. And you get used to going to town by yourself."

Darlene and Sam, who live across the street from each other, head for home and Moira continues up the road. She describes her first visit to King. "They took us up and walked us around the school. We walked the bus route in case we ever missed the bus." That's all, she says, but her voice, disappearing in the

late afternoon air, seems to say more.

Later, in the two-room schoolhouse where Moira spent most of her childhood, her mother talks about the first day. "There's usually a contingent of parents down there at the dock, taking pictures. But Moira was the only one in her grade last year." She pauses. "That's horrible, when you're the only one." Then she laughs. "We had Moira's older brother on the float in case she needed him to go with her. But she went by herself."