Outback school size is mind-boggling

KIM KIRKMAN

WITH school library access by post, a daily assembly with schoolmates encompassing 56,000 square kilometres and physical education via satellite, the Port Hedland School of the Air rather beguiles the mind.

As North West schools return for the year, the 40 SOTA students scattered throughout the Pilbara will do the same, but at home.

From Jondaryan north to Carnarvon to south of Broome, through Kaurnu and out to Telfer, situated on remote cattle stations or far-flung Aboriginal communities too small to have designated schools, they come together for SOTA.

Port Hedland SOTA principal Michael Jennings said teachers spent time teaching students via a sophisticated satellite system, which beams lessons to each of the students' sites.

"We use a computer system which is a bit like Skype, but more interactive," he said.

With three studio classrooms and a network of 60 computers, the SOTA uses an online conferencing system which allows students to see their teachers live.

It has interactive whiteboards where lessons, photographs, movies, videos and links to the internet can be accessed.

The choosing assembly allows everyone to log on, to base and keep the whole school unified, while the many SOTA camps are a huge important part of the curriculum.

Mr Jennings said teachers visited every student at least once a term, staying with the students' families, and camps brought the entire school together as a couple of times a year.

The ratio is nine or 10 students per teacher, and, according to Mr Jennings, the workload ends up as equivalent to a mainstream ratio of about 25 students to one teacher. For teachers, their highlights are visiting students at their homes.

Science teacher Blanche Wallis was introduced to a python by one student, while Year 3/4 teacher Lynn Kerr shared her student's bedroom with bats snoozing above her bed on one visit.

When you go out to these stations they are all so different and the students show you their special rivers and creeks or their horses," Ms Kerr said.

"There are currently five WA schools of the air and Mr Jennings came to Port Hedland from the Kimberley School of the Air, which enjoyed a recent visit by the internationally-known David Edna (actor Barry Humphries).

"Last year we took students to Carnarvon and some of the students had never been on an aeroplane, let alone see snow."

"That was a real highlight."
Top Gun event takes the breath away

VARIETY opted for a Top Gun theme for their annual black tie dinner last Saturday night.

The bash was held at the Polar Aviation hangar at Port Hedland airport.

Guests donned aviators, epaulettes and wings for the aviation dress code and kicked up their heels alongside the Beechcraft Barons and Cessna Caravans finding the venue.

Dinner was a five-course gourmet experience by internationally renowned chef Mark Olive.

Howie Morgan and Melody Whittle provided the entertainment, as did young Hedland performers the 3G's.

Funds raised went to Variety, the Children's Charity.

RIGHT: Joss Allen, Ruby Maione, Vicki Eastman, Joanne Skirrow and Carrie Sharplins.

Michael Jennings and Karen Jennings.

Karen and Ryan Young with Chris Perry.

Scott and Leanne Cook, Sheryn McMillan and Clark Butson.

Beverley and Tony Swierczek with Gavin Jones.

William Kalandra, Stella Rodgers and Bryce Simpson.

Shelly Slov, Jesse Richards, Kara Argeit, Jenne Boyle and Erin Carr.