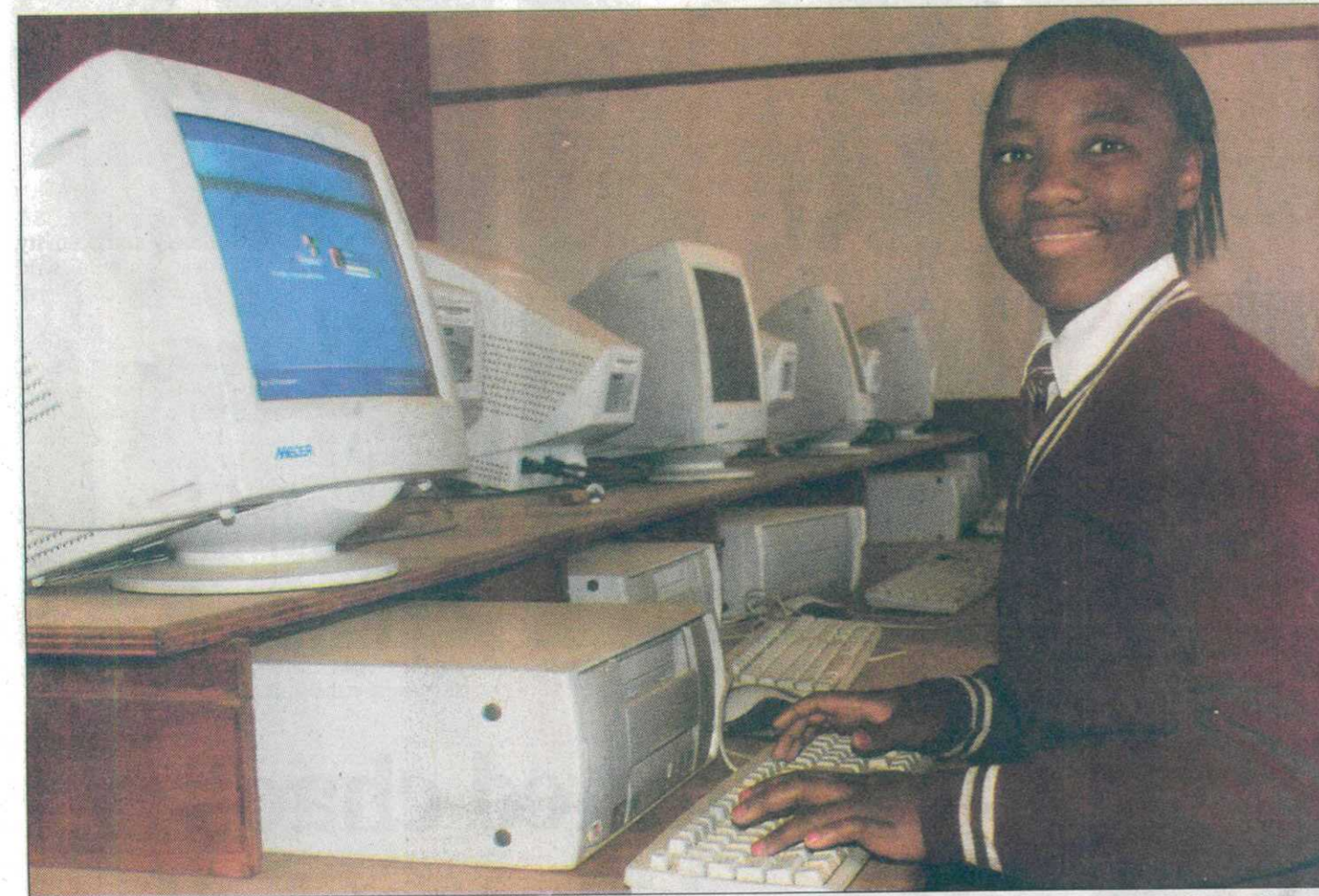


# Joy as power is restored at Gatang High School

Teachers vow there'll be no shedding of the workload as pupils prepare for final exams after months in the dark



XOLANI MBANJWA

**W**hen power was finally restored to Gatang High School in Mamelodi this week, the entire school erupted in joy.

On Monday afternoon, the bell was just about to signal the end of the school day when the electronic siren rang.

Realising that the power had been restored, the pupils, who were still in class, quickly turned on the lights to make sure they weren't dreaming.

Everyone shouted. Some ran out of their classes and danced in the dusty playground.

Recently, the Pretoria News reported on the situation at the school, whose power was cut by the Tshwane Metro Council in December.

For the past eight months, teachers could not use the photocopiers to print study material, and the library and three fully equipped computer labs remained dark and empty. Satellite linkages that allowed the school to communicate with others such as St Alban's College were cut, and pupils and teachers could not access the Learning Channel on television.

The school's partnership programmes with private companies such as BMW, Motorola, Omega and the CSIR - which had invested in information and communications technology projects at Gatang - stalled.

Repeated requests to the Metro Council

and the Department of Education for help fell on deaf ears, which prompted two principals to leave.

Gatang was the best-performing township school in the district, but teachers became increasingly worried that they would not be able to maintain the 79% matric pass rate of last year, much less improve on it. They predicted that the pass rate could drop at least 20% this year.

The recovery programme they had launched after the public service strike in June was making little - if any - difference.

However, since the power has been restored, there is renewed vigour among teachers to maintain or improve on last year's performance.

And the partnership programmes are back on track.

One of these is the CSIR's Digital Doorway computer project, which was being installed when the Pretoria News visited the school this week.

The Digital Doorway, a joint venture between the Department of Science and Technology and the Meraka Institute at the CSIR, enables people to teach themselves computer skills with minimal external intervention.

The Digital Doorway gives pupils the chance to become computer literate. Apart from the basic skills, they also learn how to navigate their way through the web of information on the Internet. This they do by discovering it for themselves, rather than being lectured.

Meraka Institute project leader Ronel Smith said the Digital Doorway introduced pupils to computer terminology, science software, 10 000 books from Project Gutenberg, a snapshot of popular online encyclopedia Wikipedia, Mindset Health and curriculum-based educational videos and interactive science simulations.

Another programme that was also being installed at the school was the Gauteng Online network, which gives pupils information on the curriculum and provides them with study material that is vital for exams, including past matric exam papers.

Sipho Hlengani, a science teacher at the school, said these programmes would help to improve the pupils' computer literacy.

Although he firmly believes the pupils would do well in the matric exams, he knows it will take a lot of hard work.

"It would be a difficult path to the top."

It is hoped that these and other projects at the school will encourage the school's 1 500 pupils - 80% of whom come from disadvantaged communities - to further their studies in engineering, actuarial science, information technology and graphic design.

Hlengani hopes the school will resurrect its virtual classroom by interacting - through a wireless broadband network - with other schools and teachers.

School principal Solly Mahlaela said: "I thank the newspaper, the education district and the municipality for coming to our rescue."

□ Zameka Dzingwe (16), a Grade 10 pupil at Gatang High School in Mamelodi, can use the computers again.

PICTURE: HERBERT MATIMBA