JENNINGS, Mo. — School districts don’t usually operate homeless shelters for their students. Nor do they often run food banks or have a system in place to provide whatever clothes kids need. Few offer regular access to pediatricians and mental health counselors, or make washers and dryers available to families desperate to get clean.

But the Jennings School District — serving about 3,000 students in a low-income, predominantly African American jurisdiction just north of St. Louis — does all of these things and more. When Superintendent Tiffany Anderson arrived here 3 1/2 years ago, she was determined to clear the barriers that so often keep poor kids from learning. And her approach has helped fuel a dramatic turnaround in Jennings, which has long been among the lowest-performing school districts in Missouri.

“Schools can do so much to really impact poverty,” Anderson said. “Some people think if you do all this other stuff, it takes away from focusing on instruction, when really it ensures that you can take kids further academically.”

Public education has long felt like a small and fruitless weapon against this town’s generational poverty. But that’s starting to change. Academic achievement, attendance and high school graduation rates have improved since Anderson’s arrival, and, this month, state officials announced that as a result of the improvements, Jennings had reached full accreditation for the first time in more than a decade.

Gwen McDile, a homeless 17-year-old in Jennings, missed so much school this fall — nearly one day in three — that it seemed she would be unlikely to graduate in June. But then she was invited to move into Hope House, a shelter the school system recently opened to give students like her a stable place to live.

She arrived a few days after Thanksgiving. The 3,000-square-foot house had a private bedroom for Gwen, who loves writing and poetry; a living room with a plush sofa she could sink into; and — perhaps most importantly — a full pantry.

She’s no longer hungry. She has been making it to class. She believes she will graduate on time.
“I’ve eaten more in the last two weeks than I’ve eaten in the last two years,” Gwen said on a recent afternoon, after arriving home from school and digging into a piece of caramel chocolate. “I’m truly blessed to be in the situation I’m in right now.”

There also is a new academic intensity in Jennings: Anderson has launched Saturday school, a college-prep program that offers an accelerated curriculum beginning in sixth grade, and a commitment to paying for college courses so students can earn an associate’s degree before they leave high school.

Anderson restored music, dance and drama programs that had been cut, as they so often are in high-poverty schools, finding the money for those and other innovations by closing two half-empty schools, cutting expensive administrative positions and welcoming new grants and a tide of philanthropic contributions. The district was running a deficit of $2 million before Anderson arrived and balanced the budget.

Sherry Johnson said her daughter Breanna, a sixth-grader in the college-prep program, is being challenged in a way she never was before.

“I feel she’s getting an education,” Johnson said, speaking outside the student-run food bank, which distributes thousands of pounds of basic goods every other Thursday.

Johnson was one of 175 people who stood in line on this Thursday, each family there to pick up a box of canned goods, fresh vegetables and a turkey, special for the holidays. “It helps a lot, it kind of carries us through,” said Johnson, whose family lives on her husband’s disability checks.

Among those handing out food was Samuel Brown Jr., a 2015 graduate of Jennings High who works as a custodian for the district. He was one of 10 members of his graduating class who didn’t find work elsewhere, and Anderson hired all of them. It was an extension of her effort to change lives by reaching beyond the classroom door.

“I’ve learned how it feels to be getting your own,” Brown said of his first job, which pays $9.50 an hour. “I’ve learned how it feels to be free.”
Jennings is a town of 15,000 that borders Ferguson, Mo., where police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown in August 2014, triggering months of protests and the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement. Like Ferguson, Jennings is a mostly poor, mostly black town where opportunity can feel out of reach.

One-quarter of Jennings’ residents are living below the federal poverty line, according to 2014 Census Bureau data. The median household income is $28,429. Just 13 percent of those age 25 and older have a bachelor’s degree, half of the state average.

Yet: In 2015, 92 percent of high school students graduated on time, and 78 percent of those graduates had enrolled in the military or post-secondary training within six months of graduation, according to state data. Gov. Jay Nixon (D) invited Anderson and a student to his state of the state address this year, praising Jennings for its “big leaps forward.”

Jennings still has a ways to go. Most students are not proficient in math and reading, and just 36 percent of the graduates in 2015 scored high enough on the ACT, SAT or similar tests to meet Missouri’s definition of “college and career ready.” But almost every academic indicator has been improving.

“What we are doing in Jennings is bigger than us,” Anderson said at the end of a holiday concert this month, triggering a wave of cheers and applause. “We are giving hope where there was no hope.”

It’s not just the support services that are making a difference, said Maureen Clancy-May, of the state education department. She said she has “no doubt that Jennings will continue to grow.”

Teachers are expected to give weekly assessments to measure student progress, and principals meet monthly with Anderson to discuss whether their schools are on track to meet goals for academic achievement and attendance.
Anderson also regularly pays new teachers a full salary to work alongside a more experienced mentor teacher for a semester or a year. And prospective hires must pass a 10-question quiz — usually in math — written for students two grade levels above the students the teacher is applying to teach. Most applicants don’t pass.

Many of the district’s initiatives, including Hope House, are done in partnership with social services organizations. But a lot of people in Jennings say that the driving force in this community’s turnaround is Anderson.

“We just needed someone who believed in us,” said Jeff Arnold, an art teacher in the district for the past 23 years. “I’m wondering if someday somebody’s going to click their heels and she’s going to go ‘poof,’ and we’re not going to have anyone else. She’s the best thing that’s happened to us in a very long time.”

Anderson, 43, has brought rapid change in a manner that is nearly the opposite of the slash-and-burn fierceness of reformers such as Michelle Rhee, the former D.C. schools chancellor who once fired a principal on television. Anderson instead uses a relentless positivity and sense of shared mission.

“Hello, Beautiful,” Anderson says, walking school corridors. “You’re awesome,” she says dozens of times each day.

“I appreciate you,” she says to the teacher working with a small group of students who are struggling in math, to the second-grader excitedly showing off his research project on dinosaurs, to the teenager who sang a solo in the holiday concert the night before.

Anderson started her career in her native St. Louis and later led Virginia’s Montgomery County schools, a 10,000-student system in southwest Virginia, for four years. In 2009, she moved to Kansas City to be closer to family, leading a charter school there until she took the job in Jennings.

Anderson’s husband, an ob-gyn, and her two college-age kids are based in Kansas City, four hours away. She keeps an apartment in Jennings, but many days she wakes up with her family at 2 a.m. on Missouri’s western border and drives to work on the state’s eastern border, arriving by 6 a.m. Then she is in constant motion, pairing her business suits and pearls with a pair of white tennis shoes as she pops in and out of schools and classrooms.

She doesn’t go to meetings, and she doesn’t drink coffee. God gives her the energy she needs, she said.

“This work is faith-filled work. You have to believe that your presence makes a difference, that your effort makes a difference in someone’s life,” she said. “Whether you wrap that in Christianity or not.”

Each morning at 7 and each afternoon at 3, Anderson picks up a stop sign and serves as a crossing guard, ushering children across one of the district’s busiest intersections. On chilly mornings, she brings a thermos of hot chocolate,
doling out the steaming treat in tiny paper cups and using the moment to check in with children.

“How do you know the needs of the community if you’re not in the community?” she said.

One recent Friday morning, she noticed a little boy had been crying — his brother had hit him, he said. Anderson admonished that brother when he strolled past a few minutes later. “You’re supposed to take care of him,” she said. “Go make it right. I’m watching.”

Her energy has helped persuade teachers to buy into initiatives such as Saturday school that require extra hours, said Curt Wrisberg, an elementary school principal who has worked in Jennings for more than 20 years. “If you see her doing it times a thousand, how can we not do it? She’s nonstop,” Wrisberg said.

Employees who don’t meet Anderson’s standards face heat, and some have lost or left their jobs, said Michael McMurran, president of the Jennings National Education Association. But overall, McMurran said, “she’s made Jennings School District a place where students and teachers want to be.”

Philanthropists are giving to Jennings, excited by the story that is unfolding here. The nonprofit foundation that Anderson set up to accept private donations has more than $80,000 in the bank to pay for the shelter, which can house up to 10 homeless and foster children, and for other efforts.

The shelter emerged from a 90-year-old dilapidated house with no roof. Anderson charged her senior administrative staff members with overseeing the renovations, and she said she gave them 30 days for work to be completed. Concept to reality in one month.

And they did it.

“We need to have the urgency for other people’s children that we have for our children, so we move at warp speed,” Anderson said.

The shelter project cost an estimated $50,000. Donors also provided all the furniture in Hope House, and a local organization specializing in foster care helped find Shelly Watts — an experienced foster mother who moved in around Thanksgiving.

Some of the kids who live at the shelter are likely to be in the child-welfare system, and Watts will receive money from the state to care for them. But there’s no state money to feed or clothe homeless kids such as Gwen. Jennings School District is footing that bill, too.

Anderson also is determined to help Gwen get a job.
She stopped by the local McDonald’s one recent morning to check on the owner’s promise to hire one student. Anderson left with a commitment to hire two, including Gwen.

Gwen had never been able to get a job despite spending her 16th birthday filling out applications. She said she was tired of depending on other people for shoes, underwear and everything else she needed and couldn’t afford. Now, she’ll be earning $7.65 an hour, starting next week.

She gave her boyfriend a tour of the house on a recent evening. It was his first visit, the only time he would be allowed upstairs.

She pointed out a closet where she puts her shoes and a desk where she does her homework. This is the place where her life could get back on track, where she could plan for a future without worrying about being hungry or cold or on her own.

“This is a beautiful room,” he said.

“Yes,” Gwen said. “I like this room.”

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Emma Brown writes about national education and about people with a stake in schools, including teachers, parents and kids.

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