ALBANY — Funding for Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s signature proposal to help the state’s failing schools unevenly distributes funding between districts and might not be enough to fund the wraparound services he pushed for during his 2016 State of the State address, some education advocates say.

Cuomo proposed $100 million to go toward transforming “every failing school” in the state into a community school. Community schools provide a host of wraparound services for students and their families including physical and mental health services as well as other social services.

The education advocates said the proposal, however well-intentioned, falls short.

“It’s not like we don’t appreciate the effort, but it’s just the whole thing is not as thoughtful as it needs to be to be successful,” said Rick Timbs, executive director of the Statewide School Finance Consortium.

The proposal is expected to be discussed at the joint legislative budget hearing on education Wednesday, along with other issues facing schools.

Originally it seemed the money would go only to districts that applied for the program and planned to turn a struggling school into a
“persistently struggling” (now 21 due to a one school splitting and opening a new location), have a year to show improvement or risk being taken over by a state-approved receiver. The department in July of this year will decide which of the “persistently struggling” schools showed “demonstrable progress” and which did not and will be taken over.

The community schools formula would distribute aid to the “struggling” and “persistently struggling” schools at a rate of $830.60 per student, based on enrollment from the 2014-2015 school year.

The high-need districts have a slightly more complex formula that includes enrollment numbers, need, poverty levels, students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and census data from 2000.

The way it works out, however, leaves out about two-thirds of the state's schools, including some high-needs districts, Timbs said, adding that the use of old data and the nature of the formula contribute to the problem.

Of the $100 million, 90 districts would receive more than $100,000 while 69 would get between $50,000 and $100,000 and 45 between $25,000 and $50,000 and 21 districts would receive up to $25,000, according to a Statewide School Finance Consortium analysis. The vast majority, 449 schools, would get nothing.

“This is a formula inside a formula inside a formula,” Timbs said. “The whole system is nonsensical.”

For example, two districts in Oneida County show the discrepancy in the system and fault in the formula. Utica City schools are slated to receive $273,267, while Rome City schools would get $369,655. Utica has about twice as many students, a higher rate of whom are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and one of the district's schools is a “struggling school,” while Rome has no schools on the list.

And there's too little money in the initiative to make significant change, Timbs said.

On average it costs $1,300 per student to implement a community school that doesn't include academic services such as tutoring or summer programs, only mental health and wellness programs, according to research done by the New York State School Boards Association. The data is from 2011, the most recent available.

“As you can see, there's a big gap between [Cuomo's] numbers and the $1,300 we
estimate,” association spokesman David Albert said of the governor's proposal.

Many questions are not addressed in the proposal. It's unclear if the money must be used on new plans, or can be used to fund existing efforts. For example, if a district put a community schools coordinator in place this school year, can they use the aid to fund the position for the 2016-2017 school year?

The aid, according to the budget proposal, can be used in a number of ways including, co-locating academic, health, mental health, nutrition, counseling and legal services for students and their families. It also would allow for the hiring of a community school site coordinator or supporting other costs incurred to maximize students' academic achievement, according to the proposal.

With the flexibility, some districts might be better off using the limited funds for their school turnaround efforts or for other costs.

"It's not that they think community schools are a bad idea, but they are concerned about being able to pay regular bills," said New York State Council of Superintendents Deputy Director Bob Lowry.

The executive proposal has been called "insufficient" by advocates, including a $266 million increase in foundation aid, which was established after the state Court of Appeals ruled in 2006 that New York was underfunding its schools and not meeting its constitutional burden.

Districts and municipalities are also facing a tax cap of nearly zero, driven below the normal 2 percent figure by the minimal rate of inflation. The low cap decreases their ability to raise local funds through the property tax levy.

Many districts already are contending that they won't be able to make ends meet, so the community school aid might be better used to maintain services and positions they were beginning to restore following deep cuts made after the Recession hit in 2008, Lowry said.

The money also could be used for “struggling” schools' turn around efforts. The “persistently struggling” schools were allotted $75 million for a two-year period starting in the 2015-2016 school year, but “struggling schools” were not given any funding, something the state education commissioner MaryEllen Elia has pushed the Legislature for, and advocates are expected to ask for at the budget hearing Wednesday.

Another issue is the timing of the funding. "Persistently struggling" schools received the $75 million on Jan. 11, according to the education department — halfway through their one-year turnaround process.

The affected districts for the most part told POLITICO New York they were able to move some other funding around to accomplish what they need to while they waited for the money. However some lawmakers were furious to hear the funding took so long.

“I'm not aware of that. If it's true, I would be very upset about that. The money was supposed to be applied to the schools so they could utilize it in a timely fashion,” Senate education committee chair Carl Marcellino told POLITICO New York last week. “They need as much time as they can to make the appropriate changes and adjustments ... so if it was delayed ... in my mind there really is no good reason for that.” It was unclear why the funding was held up.
Comparatively, the community school aid is included in the school aid runs — a series of charts showing how much money each school district would receive after applying the state’s complex funding formulas — not grant form.

“We would always say it’s better to have formula-based aid than a grant, especially if it’s going to be recurring,” NYSSBA’s Albert said. Generally items included in the runs are continued the following year, but it’s not clear if this will be the case with community school aid.

“The beauty of the formula aid is that you know what you’re going to get and if you can figure out the aid formula you understand how it’s being distributed. A grant is not the case,” Albert said.

Though any funding is appreciated, some lawmakers and education advocates are saying the money would be better utilized if it went towards straight school aid.

“I think we’re putting a Band-Aid on a broken leg,” said Assemblyman Anthony Brindisi.

The Utica Democrat said the state should be focusing on fully implementing the Foundation Aid Formula and more equitably funding districts.

“The money that is going into the formula is certainly not going to the districts that need it most and by doing this on a patchwork basis we’re ignoring the larger issue of how do we adequately fund high needs school districts,” Brindisi said.
An unexpected grilling for de Blasio portends fight over tax cap

Mayor: CUNY commitment similar to state’s for SUNY

Union sues over changes to evaluations, improvement plans

Advocates ask Cuomo to include MTA capital funding in budget

Be the first to comment.