The Washington Legislature: School funding, mental health care top lawmakers’ agenda

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OLYMPIA – The 2017 Washington Legislature opens noon Monday with the standard amount of fanfare, to be followed Wednesday by inaugural speeches and celebrations in the Capitol.

But with a court order to improve public schools hanging over their heads, a two-year $40 billion budget to fight about and the prospect of big changes from Washington, D.C., on the horizon, lawmakers won’t have much time to bask in the ceremonial glow.

They'll struggle to get everything done in the 105 days set aside for the session, and no one will be surprised if they need extra time to finish their work, as they have six out of the past seven years. In fact, many lawmakers and lobbyists doubt they'll adjourn much before July 1, when the state turns over a new fiscal year and needs a new budget to be passed and signed, just to keep the lights on and state workers on the job.

In preparation for what could be a marathon session, here are five things to watch from the time lawmakers convene Monday until whenever they quit,
Public schools

Lawmakers face a deadline on a Washington Supreme Court order that says the state has consistently failed to provide the money needed for basic education in public schools. The details are complicated and contentious, but most agree it will require the state coming up with more money to pay teachers and other school staff. They must also even out the inequities between schools in property-rich districts, primarily in the urban and suburban Puget Sound regions, and those in struggling districts in small-town and rural Washington.

A lawmaker who won’t wax eloquent about the need to improve the chances of the state’s school children – hereinafter to be known as “our most valuable resource” – is rare. But agreement on how much to pay, how soon to pay and where to get the money is even rarer. As Gov. Jay Inslee noted last week in a preview of the session, the state has been struggling with this for 40 years; if it was easy, they would’ve figured it out years ago.

Mental health

The state has been fined by federal courts for inadequate facilities for mental health patients, and struggled to come up with adequate staff levels for its largest psychiatric institution, Western State Hospital. That facility also experienced some high-profile escapes by patients who were awaiting court proceedings or treatment after being found not guilty by reason of insanity.

Inslee has a plan to increase pay for medical staff and move some patients out of Western State, and Eastern State in Medical Lake, to smaller community-based facilities. But it’s a multi-year program that comes with a high price tag.

Taxes

Inslee has a plan to come up with money for schools, improved mental health care and other new programs with a series of tax changes that include a carbon tax, a capital gains tax on high-end investors, changes to the tax on business services and eliminating some tax breaks. Legislative Democrats also want to consider some new taxes and closing of tax breaks to pay for schools and to shift the burden of taxes, which some say falls disproportionately on the poor and middle class. They talk about a once in a lifetime opportunity to make the system fairer while ensuring money for schools will be adequate into the future.

Republicans are holding to their stance that raising taxes would be a last resort, and extra tax money from the state’s strong economy might be enough to pay for school improvements. Inslee and Democrats also must face the problem that voters rejected a carbon tax in November and have previously rejected an income tax and closing some tax “loopholes” that are on their lists.
Anti-tax forces might be quick to file for a referendum of any tax changes affecting the general public that can be negotiated between Inslee and the Legislature.

The Legislature must also address a problem with the formula for local school district levies, which is scheduled to be reduced, forcing lower budgets unless the state makes up the difference. It’s known generally as the “levy cliff,” because districts believe they will be forced over one unless lawmakers change the deadline for scaling back the levy or come up with the money.

Driver’s licenses

Washington’s standard driver’s license won’t be accepted as valid ID for some purposes, such as boarding an airplane, in 2018. The state is under pressure to revamp its system so the standard license clearly says that, and anyone who wants identification for a plane ride or access to federal facilities gets a more expensive enhanced license. A bipartisan agreement between the leaders of the Transportation Committee in each chamber seems to have a solution, and Inslee said recently he agrees with it.

Partisan divide

Democrats hold a two-seat majority in the House. Republicans, with the help of a conservative Democrat willing to vote with them on most issues, hold a one-seat majority in the Senate. But all caucuses have a range of political philosophies, so major legislation will need broad appeal to have a chance of becoming law.

Recognizing the need for bipartisanship regarding public schools, lawmakers last year set up a task force on education funding designed to “jump start” those discussions. The task force was to produce a study that would lead to recommendations to be presented on the first day of the 2017 session. Democrats produced their recommendations last week, but Republicans said they could offer no more than guiding principles until they get more data, possibly by early February.