Legislative session starts with deadlock over education funding

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The Washington State Legislature opened Monday in Olympia. State House of Representatives are sworn in as a group by Justice Charles Johnson. At left, foreground is Zack Hudgins, district 11. (Greg Gilbert/The Seattle Times)

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OLYMPIA — Even before the 2017 Washington legislative session began Monday, state lawmakers battled over K-12 education funding, the year’s top priority.
Hours before legislators filed into the ornate House and Senate chambers for their opening ceremonies, lawmakers on the Education Funding Task Force failed to approve formal recommendations on how to fund Washington’s education system.

Legislators even deadlocked on approving the approaches — a plan by Democrats and “guiding principles” by Republicans — that members of those parties released publicly last week.

It wasn’t necessarily a surprise. Yet the rift underscored the political difficulties of satisfying the state Supreme Court’s McCleary education-funding order.

The 2012 order ruled that Washington has been violating the state Constitution by underfunding its schools. Justices since 2014 have held the state in contempt for failing to make enough progress on a full funding plan.

Lawmakers this year are trying to fulfill the last big remaining part of McCleary: figuring out how the state should fund salaries for teachers and other school workers. Currently school districts use local property-tax levies to cover a chunk of the salaries.

During the task force’s final meeting, Republicans said they worried about formally voting for any specifics on a possible plan when they still weren’t convinced how much a final proposal might cost.

“I believe that the court will hold us accountable for whatever we put into this report, I think it's important that we get the information right,” Rep. Paul Harris, R-Vancouver and task force member, said during the meeting.

Afterward, Democrats vented their frustration that Republicans had declined to publicly release a plan — or even agree to forward to the Legislature the reports the two parties had released last week.

With the task force, “we set up a system that would be different from the way we usually do it,” said Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island and task force member. “Now we’re just back to legislative Ping-Pong” where the parties trade competing budget proposals.

While odd-year legislative sessions such as this one are scheduled to run 105 days, divided government in recent budget-writing years has forced lawmakers in overtime sessions. In 2015, a series of standoffs ultimately stretched the session into July.

Aside from grappling with education funding, legislators are expected to work on Washington’s mental-health system in the 2017-19 state operating budget.

Gov. Jay Inslee’s proposed 2017-19 operating budget seeks $4.4 billion in new taxes and puts forward a plan to resolve the McCleary decision, fund other education needs, boost mental-health spending and approve raises for state employees.
Lawmakers in the GOP-controlled Senate and Democrat-controlled House will release their own budget proposals later in the session.

Even with the task force’s failure to find agreement, legislative leaders Monday struck a positive tone.

Democratic House Speaker Frank Chopp of Seattle, addressing lawmakers from the House rostrum, emphasized that legislators would find a way to fund education.

“Our young people are depending on us to get the job done,” Chopp said.

As he rose from his desk on the House floor to speak to lawmakers, House Minority Leader Rep. Dan Kristiansen, R-Snohomish, acknowledged the session’s challenges.

But, “Now it’s time to govern,” said Kristiansen. “And governing is what we were actually hired to do.”