

5 Things To Know About 2014 Legislative Session

Kansas legislators return Monday to the Statehouse to begin their 90-day, 2014 session. The session is scheduled to run through mid-May, with legislators taking a recess in April before returning to finish remaining business.

Here are five things to know about the Kansas legislative session:

SCHOOL FINANCE RULING: Legislators are waiting on a decision from the Kansas Supreme Court over school funding. Attorneys for the plaintiff parents and school districts say lawmakers failed to fulfill promises made in 2006 to adequately fund schools. The state says no actual harm has been done to students by education cuts and that the state did its best to fund schools in the wake of the Great Recession. A ruling either way will have significant consequences. If the plaintiffs prevail, the state may be forced to take money away from other programs or initiatives -- such as income tax cuts -- to pay for schools. Some Republican lawmakers say they're prepared to defy such a ruling.

CRIME AND PRISONS: Lawmakers are expected to debate proposals that would modify the state's "Hard 50" prison sentence for certain murder cases, as well as amend the state's capital murder statutes. The Department of Corrections is also expected to seek \$26 million to ease overcrowding at the El Dorado prison.

PENSIONS: Kansas faces a nearly \$10 billion shortfall in its public employee pension system. The gap represents the amount of money in the system compared to the benefits that have been promised to state employees, teachers and local government employees. Legislators enacted changes in 2012 aimed at closing the gap and requiring increased contributions by employees. Some legislators want additional changes to the pension program to reduce the liability sooner.

ELECTION YEAR: All statewide offices are on the ballot this year, as well as all 125 seats in the Kansas House. Senators will next stand election in 2016. House Minority Leader Paul Davis, a Lawrence Democrat, is seeking his party's nomination and the right to challenge Brownback for the governor's office in November. The two have sharp differences over taxes and the funding of essential state services.

NEW FACES: Seven House members are starting their first session in Topeka. The House and Senate both convene at 2 p.m. with brief remarks from House Speaker Ray Merrick and Senate President Susan Wagle. The Senate is likely to read the appointment of Lindsborg Sen. Jay Emler who has been selected by Gov. Sam Brownback to fill a vacancy on the Kansas Corporation Commission. If confirmed, Emler would resign his Senate seat and a replacement would be appointed by local GOP officials. Republicans control both chambers with a 32-8 Senate advantage and 92-33 margin in the House.

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