

[more peter parker than spider-man]

[a million stories]

+ CALL TO ACTION

As state and local politicians search behind **the proverbial couch cushions** in hopes of **scraping together the \$304 million** the school district says it needs to retain any semblance of decent public education, they've thrown out a number of **fresh ideas for last-ditch fundraising**: Tax cigarettes and cocktails! Garnish the wages of tax cheats! Use gaming revenues! Raise the Use & Occupancy tax!

Recently, though, a few legislators have raised **the specter of a much older idea**: Seek relief in court to make the state pay. The city and school district did just that in 1997, but lost. Now, however, as the district **stares down a so-called doomsday budget** that would eliminate arts, extracurriculars and counselors, some think there's again a case for legal intervention.

"I'm looking into it," state Sen. Anthony Williams said. "But I'm **not a lawyer; I'm a legislator**. The county should look at the court system." In the meantime, Williams supports Mayor Nutter's plan to raise cigarette and liquor taxes, and says he's **using all his clout** as Democratic whip to make sure his colleagues "understand the need." The city needs state approval to impose those tax increases.

State Rep. Mike O'Brien doesn't think that approval is likely. So he thinks school districts should seek a writ of mandamus, a legal action by which **the court could compel the legislature to uphold its constitutional obligation** to support a "thorough and efficient system of public education." The court previously said it didn't have that authority, he acknowledges. "But what's happened since?" For one thing, **Gov. Corbett cut \$1 billion** from basic education, only a fraction of which has been restored. And, "the state has come in and taken over the school district. ... **In essence, it's now their responsibility to fund education.**"

Michael Churchill of the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia brought the school-funding case to court in the '90s. **He's skeptical** O'Brien's idea could work. "Under the present state of law, I don't believe mandamus is available. It would require the court to decide that that opinion was wrong, or that circumstances had changed significantly enough." On the other hand, he adds, "I have no doubt that if the courts were willing to review it **they would find the current system of funding schools in Pennsylvania to be unconstitutional.**" Churchill says he continues to monitor the situation statewide, and that options could include a new state lawsuit or even a federal suit. But, he warns, "Litigation is a long process." Instead of waiting for the courts, "**the public should directly pressure the legislature,**" he says. "The reason [for the current crisis] was that legislators have not gotten the kind of pressure necessary."

—Samantha Melamed

+ PARTY CENTRAL

Trivia time, politicians: Where's the Philly headquarters of the Republican Party? "I would venture to guess **there's not one single person in Philadelphia who would even know** where Republican headquarters are right now," admits state Rep. John Taylor, newly elected chairman of the Republican City Committee. In fact, the office has been, for decades, just above the Windsor Hotel, at 17th Street and the Parkway. But not for long. Currently, the RCC is quietly preparing to relocate its HQ to a storefront at Frankford and Cottman avenues in Mayfair.

Even for a political party that **encompasses only about one in 10 of Philly's registered voters**, mostly in the Northeast, the old digs were just too anonymous, says Taylor, who happened to be

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