

Editorial

Teachers Urge Voters to Reconsider

by Tony Gauthier
LHS instructor

It's true--it really is true. The people control their schools. Some may ask, "Which people?", but those of us who work in the Lawrence school district are highly sensitive to the watchful eyes that are scrutinizing us.

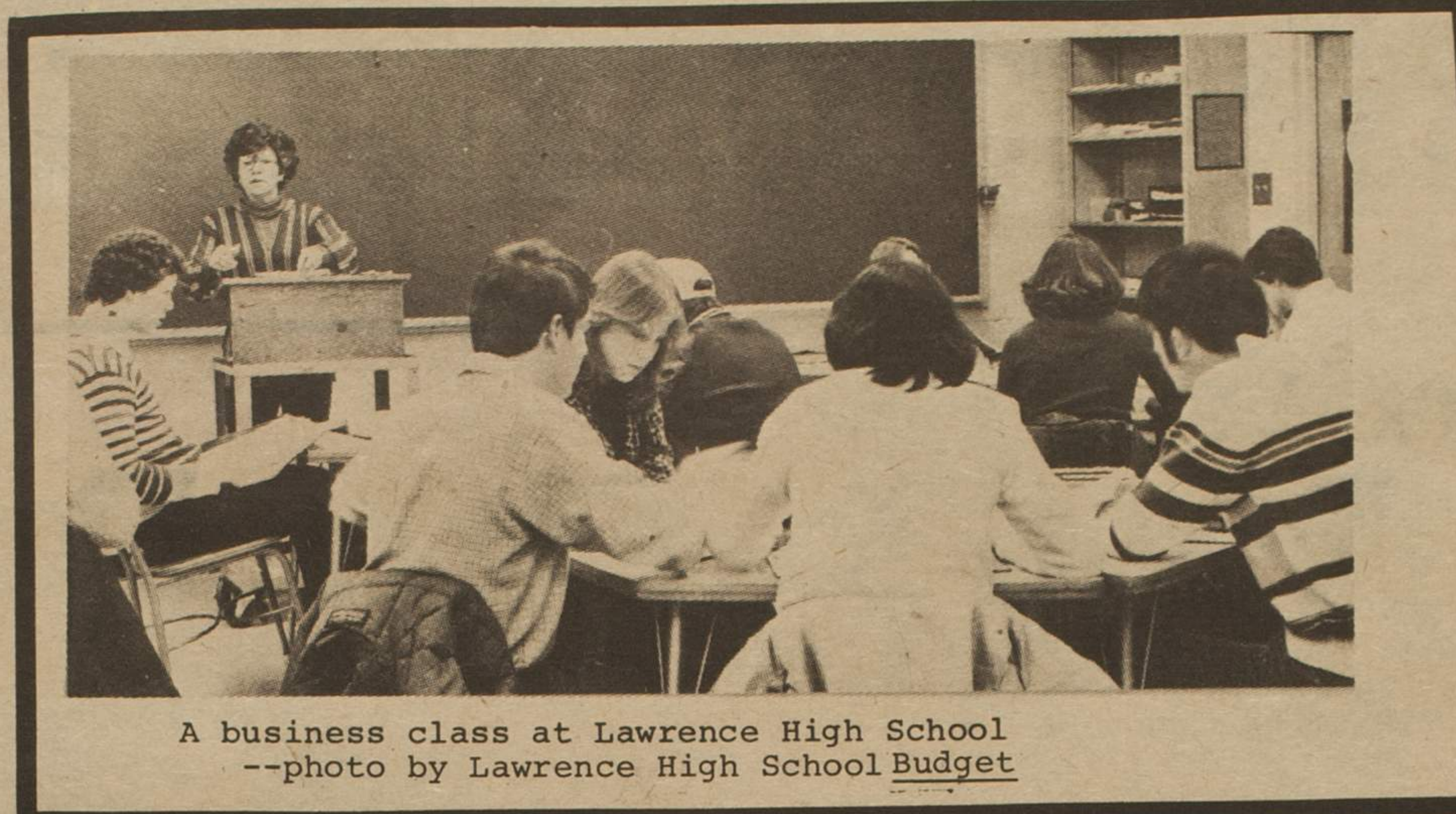
Most of our "supervisors" are not visible. The public's interest in its schools is shown in ways which often go unnoticed except when the comments are newsworthy (often newsworthy means "negative").

But we who teach, who administer, who maintain the buildings, and who make policy are constantly receiving signals of various kinds from people with varying messages.

Most of what we hear is positive. We believe that the public is generally satisfied with most of the things we are attempting to do. The children are learning more and faster than children in most school districts across the state and the nation.

As we perform our duties at school most of us feel a direct and close bond with the community. We are part of it and we generally are made to feel that the community values our contributions to its young people. For most of us, that is the true reward of our profession.

But we have to eat, too. We have to keep up with the cost of living. We are uncomfortable asking for higher salaries. But the feelings we get from our contact with various elements of Lawrence lead us to believe that



A business class at Lawrence High School
--photo by Lawrence High School Budget

most people are willing to reward us with a fair and reasonable salary.

We went to them with a reasonable request. All seven board members representing almost every point of view in Lawrence agreed enthusiastically; we thought the voters would, also.

The vote in the recent referendum shook those beliefs. Since May 9, we have been going through a rigorous and serious self-examination for any possible contributions we might have made to any citizen's "no" vote. We know we need the money. We know that all of our employees are underpaid (using comparative data from comparable districts).

We believe the community of Lawrence is getting much more education than it is paying for. (Again comparing tax rates in comparable districts shows the mill levy in

Lawrence to be substantially below the average).

As we discuss the causes of the referendum failure, we always get back to one basic fact: most of the voters in Lawrence did not vote on May 9. This disturbs us because it makes us wonder about the real nature of the relationship between the schools and the community.

We believe that most of our supporters did not go to the polls. We believe that they felt the referendum would pass without their votes. We believe that they recognize our needs, but that they did not think we needed their vote.

But voting against salaries will not solve those problems, nor will it motivate anyone in the district to work harder to solve them.

Voting "no" will in fact make those solutions even harder to find, and even more difficult to implement. Morale is low.

Most of us have concluded that something went wrong on May 9. We do not believe the people of Lawrence want their teachers, cooks, custodians, and secretaries to be underpaid. We do not believe the people of Lawrence are unsatisfied with their schools.

We have begun to wonder, though, if the people have not taken these services for granted. We conducted a well-organized and straightforward campaign to inform the people of Lawrence about the referendum.

We suspect we didn't get the message through that we are in financial distress. Most of us probably did our share to confuse the real issue with irrelevant facts.

For instance, how many voters knew that money for construction cannot be used for salaries? The law will not allow it.

And how many people knew that by voting against the referendum they were reducing the pay increase of over one third of the teachers to less than three per cent for next year?

The financial affairs of a \$10-million school district are complicated, but they are comprehensible to any one who will take a few minutes to examine the basics.

continued on pg. 11.

School Board Pushes for New Vote

by Martha Masinton
School Board Member

Early this spring the USD 497 Board of Education voted unanimously to submit a referendum question to the voters of the district: Would the electorate allow us to increase our General Fund budget by 15 per cent in order to provide substantial salary increases for all district employees (15 to 18 per cent increase for custodians, cooks, maintenance personnel, and secretaries; 13 per cent for teachers; and 11 per cent for administrators)?

On May 9, we got an answer--no, by 271 votes. As a Board member, my reaction to the result was one of dismay--what had gone wrong? Ultimately, I concluded

that I had failed in my responsibility to the community--my responsibility to convey accurately and persuasively the urgency of the district's need for the increase and the facts of our financial situation.

When the Board met to consider whether or not to resubmit, that same sense of responsibility led me to join the majority in a 4-2 vote in favor of bringing the question to the people again, this time eliminating the 11 per cent increase for administrators. The split vote reflected, not a disagreement on the need for a referendum, but a difference of opinion on the appropriateness and effect on the public of

such a speedy resubmission.

Those of use voting in favor felt that the district's need warranted immediate action, as well as an intensive effort to define just what is at stake here. To that end, I would like to address some questions that have been raised concerning the referendum.

1. Why do we need to increase salaries so substantially? Lawrence has for years had a reputation in the state for maintaining a first-rate school system while paying marginally adequate salaries. Lawrence itself has been the drawing card--people have been willing to come here for less because the University offers easy access to professional improvement.

The evidence of the last couple of years is that this is no longer the case. People simply can't afford to give up the extra \$500, \$1000, or even \$3000 that they could earn in another district, and in education as in other fields, it's the more competent people who have the greater professional flexibility.

The times have caught up with us in Lawrence: if we want to keep our good teachers and hire others, we are going to have to offer competitive salaries.

The 13 per cent increase asked for in the referendum would bring teachers' salaries up to this year's average for the 11 largest school districts in Kansas and for the Big 8 university cities. The larger per centage increases for classified workers reflects the fact that their salaries are at the bottom of the scale for comparable positions in the 11 Kansas and 8 university districts.

2. How did we get into this situation? Given that salaries

in Lawrence had never been notoriously high, the district has lost even more ground as a result of the School Finance Law enacted by the Kansas legislature in 1973. Without going into the more arcane

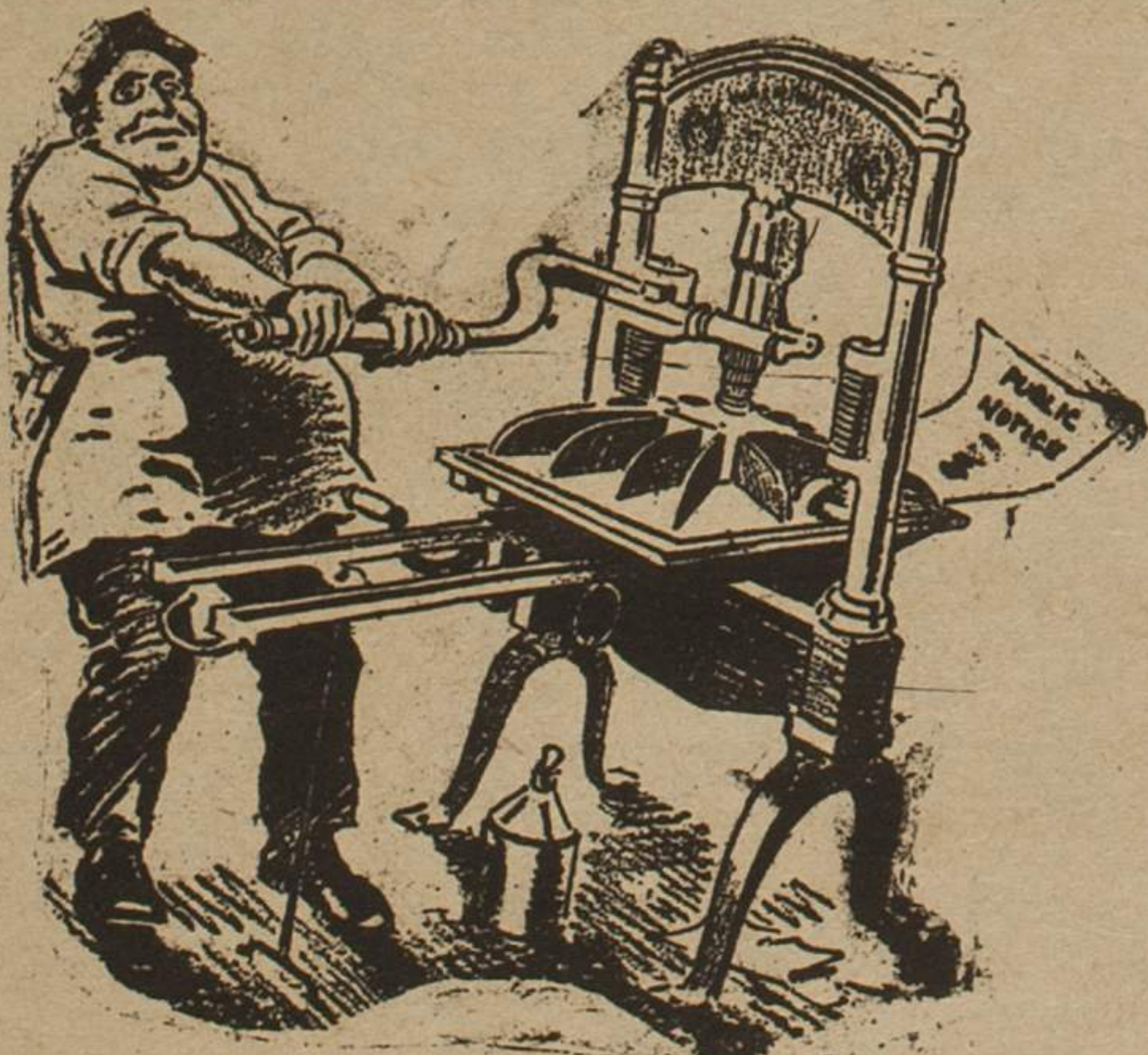
aspects of this very complex law, we can focus on one of its most significant features--the budget lid. For the past five years, school districts in Kansas have been limited to a five per cent to eight per cent increase per year in their General Fund budgets. The five per cent to eight per cent range is not a function of local decision-making: the legislature sets the per centage in a given year, and then, through the application of an equalization formula, local districts are told precisely how much they can increase their per-pupil budget.

Unfortunately, as such mechanism has kept costs down through these years, and inflation has wrecked havoc not only on the district but also on its employees. Because salaries already account for 86 per cent of the General Fund budget and the other 14 per cent goes for such things as utility bills and supplies, there simply is no other money available.

The only way out from under this lid, according to the law, is a referendum, which could allow a one-year increase of up to 15 per cent in the General Fund budget.

3. Why not forget about the swimming pool, the Lawrence High science wing, the tennis courts, and West Junior High's auditorium and use that money for salaries? The short answer to this question is simply that to do so would be to break the law--the same law referred to above.

Under that law, the Board is authorized to levy a tax of up to four mills for a period of five years for the purpose of maintaining or constructing buildings and purchasing certain types of equipment.



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