

Officials ignite ire with pro-gun stances

2 on school boards in East County face calls for resignation

By Karen Pearlman

David Chong is president of the La Mesa-Spring Valley school board. He also is the owner of an El Cajon gun store.

Jim Miller Jr., an attorney, is a school board member with the Cajon Valley Union School District. Like Chong, he is a member of the San Diego County Gun Owners.

Both officials are facing demands they resign their school board seats after publicly expressing support for gun ownership.

For a growing number of East County residents, a pro-gun stance is no longer compatible with public service on a school board.

It is the latest conflict over gun ownership to erupt in the county since 17 people — 14 students and three staff members — were killed Feb. 14 at a high school in Parkland, Fla.

Last month, the state board that oversees the Del Mar Fairgrounds heard scores of speakers weigh in on whether it should end the popular gun show that is held there several times a year. And students at schools countywide have staged organized walkouts to show their support for gun control.

Chong and Miller said they jumped into the emotionally charged debate because they felt gun advocates were getting short shrift in educational settings.

Chong said owning a mom-and-pop store that sells firearms and ammunition and serving on the local school board are not mutually exclusive. He stocks hundreds of new and used guns, from pistols to AR-15 rifles, at his Main Street store, AO Sword Firearms.

He said he believes strongly in the First Amendment right to free speech and the Second Amendment right to bear arms. Both, he said, have room in the public discourse.

“I absolutely identify with the feelings that the people who have spoken out have, the school violence, the senseless killings,” Chong said. “These kids shouldn’t be dying. It’s not fair, it’s not right. It’s cruel and twisted.”

But, he said, “school safety is not a gun issue; it’s a human issue.”

A group of speakers at an April school board meeting in La Mesa asked the other four elected officials to join them in calling for Chong's resignation. They believe Chong crossed a line in a video he made and posted on Facebook endorsing El Cajon Mayor Bill Wells' run for Congress. In the video, Chong criticizes elected officials who take "firearms policy advice from kids who were eating Tide pods just last week." Chong later explained that he was using humor when he referred to last year's internet fad of kids eating the laundry detergent packets to make a point about the "folly of youth and the dangers of under-informed policy." La Mesa resident Emily Green said she would be uncomfortable allowing her two children, currently in preschool and kindergarten, to attend the district school as long as Chong is on the board.

"I feel like it's a conflict of interest, someone who profits selling AR-15s to be on the school board and making decisions concerning student safety," Green said.

Rob Weaver, the parent of a child in the district, told the school board at a meeting last month that Chong is "blatantly mocking and bullying children who are survivors of horrific events in which they have witnessed the brutal murder of their friends."

But Chong said he is well within his rights to express his opinion. In his four years on the board, he said, he has never received the kind of "public venom" he is getting now.

Miller, a school board member at Cajon Valley since 2016, has earned similar ire from members of the public. Miller wore a "Second Amendment" T-shirt and NRA cap at an April school board meeting in El Cajon, and that was the final straw for advocates now seeking to unseat him. Miller has been an equally staunch advocate for gun rights. He has been vocal with his stance, and that has brought public scrutiny and calls for his removal from the school board.

In response to a group of more than 50 people who showed up to voice their displeasure at an April board meeting, Miller said, "They should, instead of showing up and disrupting a school board meeting demanding us to consider a resolution, have a conversation with the superintendent as was offered to them."

He said he is more interested in focusing on the real world, “what we can really do instead of politicizing shootings and the deaths of these kids, which is horrible.”

Miller said that as an elected official, he is there to “support the entire Constitution, not just the part you like or don’t like.”

A difference of opinion, however, no matter how strong, is not cause for removal, according to legal experts.

“Unless there’s a violation of conflict-of-interest rules or misuse of school board resources, elected school board members have the same First Amendment right to express their views as any member of the public,” said David Loy, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of San Diego and Imperial counties.

“If community members object, they have the First Amendment right to organize, campaign and vote a board member out of office. That’s how democracy works.”

Music Watson, spokeswoman for the San Diego County Office of Education, said that while her office doesn’t have a direct role to play, each school district’s governing board has its own policies regarding governance standards and making public statements on behalf of the board — or not. “Speaking generally, these board members have the same right to free speech as any other member of the public,” Watson said. “That includes in their dress.”

Watson said the greater concern needs to be a broader discussion about school safety and security.

“Everyone agrees we want our children to be as safe as possible when they are in our care, and I think we all agree that it’s our duty as educators to support our students as they grapple with tough issues,” Watson said. “That’s why our focus is on continuing our partnerships with law enforcement and others to prevent and respond to threats and violence, and on providing age-appropriate, non-political opportunities for students to participate in the national dialogue around school safety.” Chong said he is happy to debate the topic “rather than play gotcha wars over tangential comments.”

“I understand some people don’t understand the need or relevance of firearms in our civil society,” Chong said. “I can speak to that and even work with it. There are many anti-gun people in the district, and we work with mutual respect, happily even. They often tell me things like I change their view of what gun owners are like.”

Miller said he is hopeful there will come a day when school districts will include a “gun education component” into the curriculum.

Rather than demonizing firearms, he said educating kids about guns would provide a healthy understanding of them.

karen.pearlman@
sduniontribune.com