



About Special Education District of Lake County

Located in Gages Lake, Illinois, the Special Education District of Lake County (SEDOL) is a special education cooperative that supports students from 31 local school districts who are facing physical, emotional and other learning challenges. Their mission is to provide “Exceptional Services for Exceptional Students by Exceptional Staff.”

SEDOL covers about 400 square miles within Lake County, Illinois and provides educational programs for approximately 600 students with moderate to very severe disabilities within their 31 member districts. Additionally, SEDOL annually provides diagnostic services for over 1,000 children and their families.

SEDOL employs over 600 staff to serve children with disabilities. Employees consist of teachers, teacher assistants and a wide variety of support staff including audiologists, nurses, occupational therapists, physical therapists, prevocational coordinators, psychologists, social workers, speech/language pathologists, and numerous other support staff.

Looking For Solutions

SEDOL’s journey is one that many may find relatable. As a special education cooperative, which serves many students with a variety of different disabilities and needs, they are familiar with different types and levels of behavior. However, with the return to in-person learning following the pandemic, they saw a significant upward trend in behavior and began to notice the overwhelming negative effect trauma was having on their students, as well as their staff.

In an effort to better support their staff and students, SEDOL began searching for additional tools to promote safety and compassion. Ukeru was appealing to them as a partner because of its trauma-informed, restraint-free approach.

“ At first, it was difficult to envision Ukeru in a school setting. Now, I can’t imagine schools without it. Ukeru is more than just the pads and blocking techniques. It’s about trauma and how it affects the brain and the person as a whole; understanding that building positive relationships and trust with someone is the most important part of crisis de-escalation. Ukeru also opened my eyes to the prevalence of trauma. Understanding what trauma does to the forebrain really helped me realize that behavior is a form of communication. Before we react to a situation, we need to take a step back and remember that the individual is communicating something and it’s our job to figure out what that is.

Alex Letto, Behavior Specialist and Ukeru Coordinator



Working with Ukeru

SEDOL began working with Ukeru in March of 2023. They began by having 10 staff members trained as trainers. In that first training session, they spent a lot of time asking the Ukeru team questions and discussing how to carefully and strategically implement the program into their environments.

Following the initial train-the-trainer training, they spent the first two weeks reaching out to all stakeholders to inform them what Ukeru is and how it would be implemented. After they informed all necessary parties, they introduced the Ukeru pads to their students in a controlled setting, explaining to them what the pads are, what their purpose is, how they will be used, and what they will not be used for. Additionally, they strategically allowed both staff and students to physically interact with the pads in a safe, regulated environment in an effort to normalize the pads and create a positive association with them.

After about one month of seeing success with the Ukeru approach, they started to train staff more frequently in specific programs. As of January 2025, they have conducted over 60 trainings and have trained upwards of 350-400 employees. Ukeru is now integrated into their onboarding process, which has played a big role in adjusting their organizational culture. From the start, staff have a better understanding of the importance of a trauma-informed approach and environment.

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Since implementing the Ukeru system, our district has significantly reduced the number of restraints. The training provides essential insights into how the brain processes trauma, profoundly influencing staff mindsets and their approach to students in crisis. The tools and strategies used enable both students and staff to navigate potentially traumatic or triggering events without causing further harm or straining their relationships. The full extent of the benefits brought by Ukeru may still be beyond our understanding, but its positive impact on everyone involved is undeniable.

Nicole Richter, Behavior Specialist and Ukeru Trainer
Gages Lake School

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When I arrived at SEDOL in the summer of 2023, I was unfamiliar with Ukeru. However, after participating in the comprehensive training led by Alex Letto, Ukeru Coordinator and Trainer, and collaborating with staff across our buildings, it became clear that Ukeru has been instrumental in shifting both our culture and approach to supporting individuals who are dysregulated.

Having spent my entire career working with students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, I can confidently say that Ukeru is a powerful tool I wish I had in my repertoire earlier. Its impact on how we manage and de-escalate challenging situations has been transformative, and I truly believe it has enhanced the way we support our students and each other.

Matthew Crowley, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services
SEDOL

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Results

SEDOL set out to achieve four main goals district-wide:

1. Reduce the Total Number of Physical Restraints.
2. Reduce the Total Number of Students Experiencing Physical Restraints.
3. Reduce the Total Number of Physical Restraints for Students With an Emotional Disability.
4. Reduce the Total Number of Physical Restraints Within Each Individual Program.

The results have been remarkable. For their first goal, they have recorded a **96.1% reduction** of physical restraints. In response to their second goal, they have reduced the number of students experiencing physical restraint by **70.74%**. For their third goal, they have reduced the use of restraint for students with an emotional disability by **78.38%**. Lastly, they have seen tremendous success with reducing the use of restraint within each individual program. **Gages Lake School has recorded a 95.81% restraint reduction, Fairhaven School has recorded a 99.23% restraint reduction, and both Sector Programs and Laremont School have seen a 100% restraint reduction.** Due to the tremendous success that they've seen, Ukeru is one of the most requested professional development training courses at SEDOL.

Alex Letto, SEDOL Behavior Specialist and Ukeru coordinator, was excited to share the positive feedback they have received about Ukeru from their staff, "We have many staff, all in different stages of their professional career. The veteran staff often come up to me expressing that Ukeru training was one of, if not the best, training they have received in their career. The younger/newer hires will often express their enjoyment in the training. Staff will also frequently ask me to send them additional information regarding Ukeru, to learn more about it."

Letto continued by expanding on the positive impact that Ukeru has had on their district, "Ukeru has played such an important role within our school district and has truly changed how we approach both students and staff. When you implement a trauma-informed approach (a better understanding of trauma and its effects and the ability to provide a safe alternative to restrictive interventions), it can create an inviting environment that encourages relationship building and trust. It allows students to feel more calm and safe in our environment, which in turn, promotes learning. It gives staff the ability to be more proactive and preventive rather than reactive. Ukeru has been a focal point for our staff when addressing behavior of all kinds."

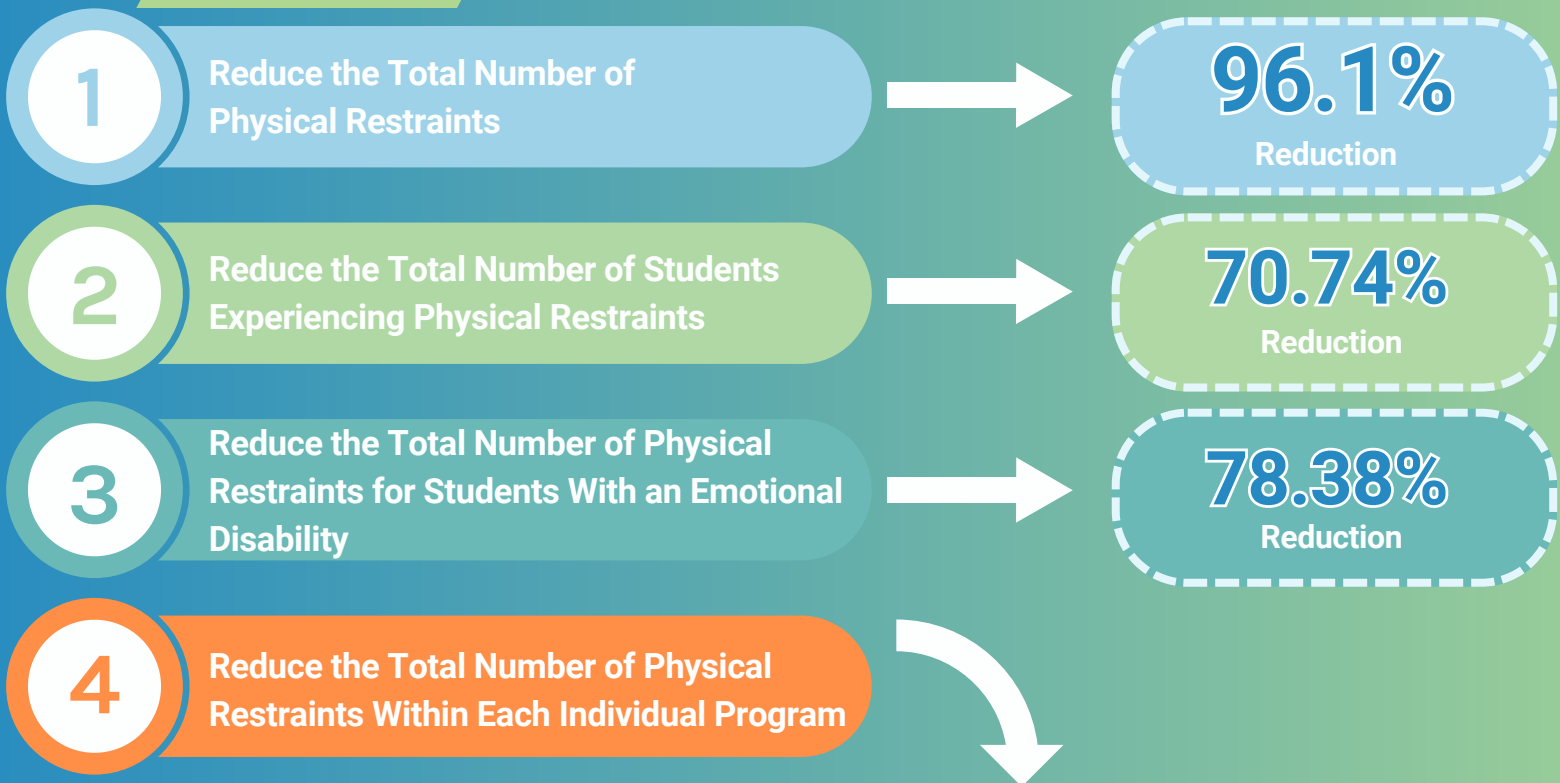
Additionally, Letto shared his experience with the Ukeru team, "Ukeru has been great to work with. The Ukeru team has a group of dedicated people that truly care about what they do."

As far as next steps, SEDOL plans to expand the training to their entire staff, now that they've seen tremendous success. They also plan to continue prioritizing trauma-informed environments for both staff and students. "We work every day to ensure our students feel calm and safe. We do this by prioritizing a trauma-informed environment," Letto proudly shared.

The proof is in the pudding. As a former skeptic turned into a believer, Letto would challenge anyone who thinks that minimizing, or even eliminating, restraint is not possible or safe and would encourage them to look at what they have accomplished in less than two years. "It is 100% possible and safe to reduce the number of physical restraints, no matter the population you work with," Letto passionately shared.

District-Wide Goals

Results



Gages Lake School

Fairhaven School

Sector Schools

Laremont School



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I was one who wasn't completely convinced of Ukeru and how effective it was going to be in our building. It made sense to me as a strategy to use rather than going hands-on with a student when the moment arose. Ukeru has proven to be effective as another tool. It allows students to work through their emotions on a pad, rather than on an individual or themselves. The use of pads also provides a barrier in between the staff and individual in crisis, increasing safety for all involved. Students may also view the use of pads to be a less intrusive, less hostile act instead of having a staff member come at them empty handed. Often, that type of behavior by staff may signal to the student that staff were going "hands-on" and in return, the students' defenses would become heightened.

The proof is in the pudding. Students have become familiar with Ukeru as well as what to expect with its use as an intervention. The number of restraints has reduced significantly. The use of Ukeru, along with staff behaviors, played a significant role in our reduction. This point cannot be contended.

Jeff Nussbaum, Teacher and Ukeru Trainer

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