ABOUT SENECA HIGHLANDS IU9

Based in Smethport, PA, Seneca Highlands Intermediate Unit 9 (IU9) serves **11,743 public school students** across 14 districts and **839 non-public students** across six schools. To support the region's most vulnerable learners, IU9 operates a specialized triad of regional hubs: **Achievement Center North, South, and West**. These centers act as vital institutional partners for local school districts by combining academic instruction with comprehensive behavioral, social-emotional, and therapeutic supports for students with complex disabilities whose needs exceed traditional classroom capacities.

THE SEARCH FOR A SOLUTION

As center-based emotional support programs, Seneca Highlands IU9's Achievement Centers serve students navigating profound behavioral and social-emotional challenges, including periods of intense acute dysregulation and crisis. Recognizing these complexities, IU9 sought a proactive framework to further strengthen their staff's crisis response protocols and maximize physical safety for both students and educators.

> *"We wanted an approach that emphasized prevention, de-escalation, and relationship building, while giving staff practical strategies to maintain safety and give students space to reregulate. Ultimately, the challenge was larger than reducing restrictive interventions. We wanted to build environments where students feel safe, staff respond confidently, and difficult behavior is approached through a trauma-informed lens rather than simply as something to be controlled."*
>
> — **Ashley Hamberger,** *Special Education Supervisor*
> **Achievement Center North**

Ukeru® emerged as an ideal partner due to its ***Comfort vs. Control®*** philosophy, which perfectly aligned with IU9's commitment to trauma-informed, relationship-centered practices. Rather than just offering an alternative crisis protocol, Ukeru's holistic methodology challenged staff to analyze the windows before, during, and after escalation, highlighting how environments, communication, and adult reactions influence self-regulation.

Additionally, Ukeru's specialized blocking equipment and techniques introduced a tangible, non-restrictive toolset to maintain physical safety while preserving the vital time and space required for verbal de-escalation. By seamlessly integrating into the Achievement Centers' existing clinical and academic frameworks, this partnership bridged a common systemic gap by proving that physical safety and trauma-informed care are deeply complementary priorities that uphold student dignity, compassion, and consistency even during severe crises.

UKERU IMPLEMENTATION

June 2025
Onsite train-the-trainer launch in Smethport, PA

14
Member districts invited to participate

17
Educational leaders registered as Ukeru trainers

Seneca Highlands IU9 initiated its partnership with Ukeru in June 2025 with an onsite train-the-trainer session in Smethport, PA. To maximize regional impact, IU9 extended this opportunity to its 14 member districts, certifying 17 educational leaders—including supervisors, principals, psychologists, and social workers—as certified Ukeru trainers. This diverse cohort established a robust internal infrastructure capable of sustaining the initiative long-term.

The foundational training blended deep philosophical frameworks with practical application, addressing trauma, brain development, trauma-informed communication, and practical, non-restrictive blocking techniques. Following this initial certification, IU9 launched a phased rollout, systemically certifying all staff across its three Achievement Center programs and regional emotional support classrooms throughout the year to build a cohesive network of skilled professionals.

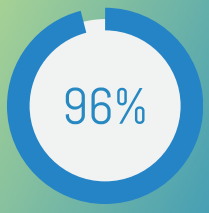
To ensure widespread organizational buy-in, the training team consistently reinforced that Ukeru is far more than physical equipment. Instructors anchored the blocking techniques within the broader context of trauma-informed care and relationship building, establishing continuous learning opportunities like regular skills practice and situational role-playing to seamlessly integrate Ukeru into daily routines.

> *"Implementing Ukeru reinforced a cultural shift from responding primarily to behavior toward understanding what drives it—encouraging staff to consider trauma, relationships, and environment. The Comfort vs. Control philosophy provided a common language for how our own responses as adults can either de-escalate a situation or unintentionally contribute to it. We emphasized that maintaining safety does not mean immediately moving toward restrictive interventions. Staff learned to slow situations down, use communication, and utilize Ukeru equipment to reinforce a culture where dignity, safety, and trauma-informed care are considered together rather than as competing priorities."*
>
> — **Ashley Hamberger,** *Special Education Supervisor*
> ***Achievement Center North***

To preserve this momentum, IU9 has structured a rigorous long-term plan for the 2026–2027 school year centered on continuous training, practice, and recertification. In July 2026, the intermediate unit successfully recertified seven core Ukeru trainers, who subsequently conducted user recertification training for frontline staff in September 2026. By intentionally revisiting both the physical techniques and the underlying theory, IU9 ensures that connecting daily practices to the larger Comfort vs. Control philosophy remains an essential catalyst for meaningful, sustainable change.

MEASURABLE IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

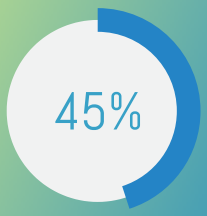
WITHIN 1 YEAR OF IMPLEMENTING UKERU



Achievement Center North

RESTRAINT REDUCTION

2024-25 School Year: 24 Restraints
2025-26 School Year: 1 Restraint



Member District

RESTRAINT REDUCTION

POSITIVE FEEDBACK FROM STAFF

INCREASED SAFETY

Within just one single year of implementation, the systemic shift at Seneca Highlands IU9 has yielded remarkable quantitative and qualitative results. Most notably, **Achievement Center North achieved an astounding 96% reduction in physical restraints**, plummeting from 24 recorded incidents during the 2024–2025 school year to just a single restraint during the 2025–2026 school year. This success has replicated across the regional network, with one trained **member district already reporting an impressive 45% reduction in restraints**.

> *While the reduction in physical restraints is an important measure of progress, the broader result is reflected in how staff approach difficult moments with students. Our goal is not simply to reduce a number. It is to create environments where staff have the knowledge, confidence, and practical tools to maintain safety while responding in ways that preserve relationships, reduce unnecessary restriction, and support students in returning to regulation."*
>
> — ***Ashley Hamberger,*** *Special Education Supervisor*
> ***Achievement Center North***

Beyond the metrics, frontline staff have responded enthusiastically to the expanded toolkit. Utilizing Ukeru blocking equipment provides an essential safeguard, allowing educators to maintain safety while creating the time and space required for verbal de-escalation, rather than jumping to restrictive responses.

This emphasis on workforce safety has directly reduced staff injuries and burnout, allowing educators to focus on student academic and therapeutic outcomes. Consequently, families have expressed strong appreciation for the compassionate, trauma-informed approaches that now define the organization's culture.



Minimizing restraint does not mean asking staff to ignore unsafe behavior or place themselves at risk. It means giving them more tools to maintain safety before a situation reaches the point where a restrictive intervention may be considered. Ukeru has reinforced that safety and trauma-informed care are not competing priorities. Through prevention, relationships, communication, and blocking techniques, staff can respond to challenging situations while preserving dignity and autonomy.

Our experience at Achievement Center North illustrates this potential. We have significantly decreased our reliance on physical restraint while continuing to support students with intense behavioral needs. Reducing restraint does not mean reducing our commitment to safety. It means expanding the ways we can achieve it.

Ashley Hamberger, *Special Education Supervisor*
Achievement Center North

NEXT STEPS

Seneca Highlands IU9 remains dedicated to embedding the Ukeru framework across all regional programs. To ensure long-term sustainability, IU9 will maintain a robust cohort of certified internal trainers to provide ongoing practice, champion the methodology, and support member districts. The long-term focus extends beyond certification numbers; the priority is ensuring Ukeru's core philosophy remains active in daily classroom interactions.

The intermediate unit will also continue integrating Ukeru into its broader commitment to trauma-informed care. This systemic approach includes analyzing how trauma impacts development, strenghtening relationships, and structuring environments for self-regulation to permanently reduce reliance on restrictive interventions.

"Our goal is for trauma-informed practice to be reflected not only in how staff respond to crisis, but also in the everyday interactions, routines, expectations, and relationships that can help prevent a crisis from occurring in the first place," concluded Hamberger.

"One of the most important lessons from Ukeru is that meaningful change requires more than introducing a new technique. It requires us to continually examine how we think about behavior, trauma, communication, and safety. The blocking equipment is an important tool, but the larger impact has been the conversation surrounding Comfort vs. Control. Ukeru reinforced our commitment to looking beyond behavior and asking what students need to feel safe, supported, and able to reregulate.

We are proud of our progress while recognizing that reducing reliance on restrictive practices is ongoing work. Our goal is to continue creating environments where students are treated with dignity and compassion and where staff feel prepared, supported, and confident in maintaining safety."

Ashley Hamberger, *Special Education Supervisor*
Achievement Center North