

Presidents in the Hot Seat: Flint Water Crisis

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to use primary evidence to formulate a response to a complex policy problem.
2. Students will be able to use primary evidence to critique the actions of historical decision-makers.
3. Students will be able to analyze and apply primary evidence to develop historical empathy for past decision-makers.

Length of Lesson: Six 45 minute class periods

Materials:

1. Presidents in the Hot Seat: Primary Document Analysis Sheet
2. Day 2 Flint Water Crisis Summary Questionnaire
3. Description of Roles Sheet
4. President Primary Documents
5. Governor of Michigan Primary Documents
6. Secretary of Health and Human Services Primary Documents
7. Mayor of Flint Primary Documents
8. Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency Primary Documents
9. Links to various online resources needed for the lesson are included throughout this lesson plan.

Start of Lesson

Day 1: How Should the President Respond in a Time of Crisis?

Anticipatory Set (Entire first 45-minute class period): Organize students into groups of five. At the start of class, have students write for five minutes individually in response to the question: “How should the President respond during a crisis?” After this, provide ten minutes for every student to share their responses as a group. Each group must develop a group response to the question. Afterwards, rearrange the classroom seating into a circle, and ask each group to share their responses to the question. Use these responses to begin a socratic seminar about how the president should respond to a crisis.

Possible follow up questions:

- What should the president immediately inquire about a potential crisis/situation (What questions should the president ask)? What should the President try to learn about the situation?
- What resources does the President have at their disposal to begin dealing with an issue?
- Should the President establish contact with local and state leaders to handle the situation? Should the president ask what they have at their disposal to immediately address the situation?
- Should the president disclose all information to the public or distribute information selectively in order to prevent panic?

Debrief: Have students take out a piece of paper and respond to the following question: If you were the President or one of the President's advisors during a major crisis, how do you think you personally would respond? Why?

Day 2: The Flint Water Crisis

Class Starter (1-2 minutes): Yesterday, we discussed how a President might respond to a crisis. For the next couple of days, you will be stepping into the role of the President and his advisors in one of the most notorious crises of the modern era; the Flint Water Crisis and subsequent water contamination of 100,000 residents of Flint, Michigan. Today we will be rapidly reviewing the information President Obama, state officials, and high clearance individuals would have had to work with from major news organizations from 2014-Present day.

Activity (30 minutes): Begin the class by displaying the following quote obtained from:

[https://www.nrdc.org/stories/flint-water-crisis-everything-you-need-know#sec-summary:](https://www.nrdc.org/stories/flint-water-crisis-everything-you-need-know#sec-summary)

“Lead is one of the most damning things you can do to a child in their entire life-course trajectory. In Flint, nearly 9,000 children were supplied lead-contaminated water for 18 months.”

- *Mona Hanna-Attisha (Flint pediatrician)*

Activity (continued): After showing the students the quote to get them interested in the subject, have the students read the full short summary located at the link above. It will give them a very basic background on the Flint Water Crisis without being overwhelming or too long. Another way to provide background information can be found at this CBS report from December 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xqzh0mYXOyQ>.

Suggested Materials to use when reading summary: You may want to use the “Day 2 Flint Water Crisis Questionnaire” when allowing the students to explore the crisis at their own pace. A template for Cornell notes is also available for interested educators. Allow students to complete the questionnaire/take in order to obtain some background knowledge that will help students to participate in the *Day 3* activities.

Transition: Explain to students that now that they have learned a basic background information about the crisis, they will now explore the more fundamental issue of the problem... the need for water.

Activity (6 minutes): Arrange the student desks into small groups and have them brainstorm together everything that water is used for that goes into their daily lives and in their communities. Explain they will make a list and the class will soon reconvene and see how many things they can come up with.

Activity (continued): Together in the groups they should have typical items listed. Some might include drinking water, water for bathing, laundry, toilets, etc. Some students may consider the more overlooked examples, such as water for farms, water for hospitals, water for city sanitation, water for hydroelectricity, etc.

After making this quick list, have the students answer the following debriefing questions in their Google Classroom or on a piece of paper.

Debrief:

1. What would you do if you didn't have clean water in your city? Would you have somewhere to go? What if you did not?
2. What should the government be responsible to do if this happens?

Day 3: Primary source analysis in preparation for the simulation.

Class Starter (3-5 minutes): Today, students will begin evaluating the primary sources for each of the roles the students are to fill. Begin by explaining to students that they will be taking on the role of President Obama and his senior advisors, as well as State and Local government to make a decision about the Flint Water Crisis. Assign each student one of the roles that needs to be filled. Once students have their roles, provide them with the documents assigned for each role.

Activity (40 minutes): For this activity, it is necessary to allow students time to read through the primary sources assigned to them, and evaluate the merit of the information provided in each document. Have students use the Presidents in the Hot Seat: Primary Document Analysis sheet to help them classify the importance of and make sense of the information they find in their documents. They will use this information tomorrow in a simulation in which they will have to make several difficult decisions based off of what they know.

Materials to use when working within groups: Students will need to use the primary sources provided to them depending on their role.

Day 4: Simulation.

Class Starter (3-5 minutes): Today, students will work within their groups of 5 to determine what course of action the President should take in order to effectively respond to the developing situation. Explain to students that their decisions will undoubtedly impact the lives of millions of Americans and that groups should spend time deliberating each decision before committing to a final resolution.

Activity (40 minutes): For this activity, the students should be seated within their groups so that they can discuss the best course of action they need to take to address the situation. Inform the students that they will need to work **collaboratively**, and present to the group the information they deemed important in the primary sources they read yesterday. By the end of class, each group should have answered and turned in all of the *Address to the American People Questionnaire*. Ultimately, students must use this information to make a decision about how the President will respond to a humanitarian crisis such as the one in Flint.

Day 5: Address to the American People.

Class Starter (3-5 minutes): Today, students will work within their groups to develop a brief 3-5 minute address which will be delivered to the American people. These addresses will explain the decisions they made yesterday about how the President will respond to the water crisis. Explain to the students that they need to address how they are planning to resolve the contaminated water with a long-term solution, supply those without clean water with a short-term solution, and finally, offer some words of encouragement to quell the fears of the American people.

Activity (30 minutes): Provide students ample time to script out their address the president will deliver to the American people. Inform students that they should use the *Address to the American People* Questionnaire to help them to formulate their response. Students should work **collaboratively** as a group to write the address, however, ultimately the student playing the role of the president will be required to give the address. Each student in the group should be made responsible for writing part of the address that answers one of the questions mentioned in the class starter, in order to promote a fair distribution of the workload.

Activity (10 minutes): The President from each group will deliver their speech to the rest of the class, outlining the course of action they will take to provide clean water for the people of Flint. The address should be brief, however, and it must adequately cover all of the points mentioned in the *Address to the American People* Questionnaire.

Day 6: Lesson Debrief

Class Starter (5-10 minutes): Up until now, you [the students] have served in the roles of the President, his advisors, and local officials to deal with the Flint Water Crisis. Today, we will analyze the actual response of President Barack Obama, Governor Rick Snyder, Mayor Dayne Walling, and others, then compare your responses to theirs. To ensure our understanding of the events of the crisis, we will look recap how the still-active crisis unfolded. If you wish to provide a timeline of the events, have your students quickly visit the following links.

<https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/04/us/flint-water-crisis-fast-facts/index.html>

Transition: As the crisis unfolded, multiple officials were warned from concerned citizens that the water quality was poor. However, the state *and* federal government took little action at first. Explain to the students that they will explore the reasons for why this was.

Activity 1: Explain that as the events were unfolding in Flint, President Obama, Governor Snyder, and local government consistently tried to downplay the dangerous amount of lead in the water.

Watch the following videos of Governor Rick Snyder and President Barack Obama drinking the (filtered) Flint water in 2016- in the midst of the crisis.

<https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2016/04/19/flint-gov-snyder-drinks-tap-water-dnt.weyi/video/playlists/flint-michigan-water-cris/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2016/may/04/obama-drinks-flint-water-video>

After the videos, ask students the following discussion questions as a class:

1. Why would these two high level officials travel to Flint and make sure to get themselves recorded while drinking Flint water? Do you think it eased tension in Flint?
2. Why did both officials mention that the water they were drinking was filtered? What if a family could not afford a water filter? Does the filter solve the problem or act as a short-term solution?
3. **If you were in their position in 2016, would you have visited Flint?**

Explain to the students that the decision to drink filtered tap water as the crisis was unfolding was likely an attempt to stop panic in the community. In President Obama's video, he declared pipes were being replaced, however that it would take two more years to be completed. At this time (November of 2019) all pipes lead pipes are expected to be replaced in the coming years. To a smaller degree, the crisis is still ongoing.

Final Debrief: Ask students to respond to the following questions (on paper or online, such as on Google Classroom):

1. Why were the lead pipes not immediately replaced at the beginning of the crisis?
2. Why did the federal government take so long to become involved?

3. Without complete federal support, did the local government respond to the crisis appropriately?
4. How has your knowledge of the responsibilities and pressures of the American presidency changed as a result of this simulation? Explain.

End of Lesson