School Dances

The Winter Ball, Homecoming, the Spring Fling.

Your high school may have had different names for them, but you probably recognize what they are: school dances. A staple of American culture, the dramatic climax of countless high-school movies, and the background of so many of teenage memories.

The dances were something to look forward to.

In 2001, more than 800 students gathered in clusters on the squeaky gym floors at John Jay High School in Westchester County, bopping up and down to Nelly songs.

In 2010, only 26 students showed up to the Homecoming dance in that same gym.

You can imagine my surprise when I returned home this past Christmas and asked my youngest sibling, a senior at the same high school I graduated from, if she was excited about the 2014 Winter Ball.

Those nights in the school gymnasium, transformed from sweaty dodge ball venue to magical glittery ballroom, held such promise.

She rolled her eyes at me.

"We haven't had a Winter Ball since I was a freshman," Lucy said.

It turns out my alma mater in Cross River, N.Y., began to cancel school dances in 2010 when attendance started to drop.

This year, they've stopped attempting to hold the dances all together. According to Assistant Principal Lisa Kor (formerly the Dean of Students when I was at John Jay), they only have the prom.

"It's sad," Kor told me. "We used to have this really nice dance, the Freshman Dinner Dance, and it was only for the ninth-graders and they all came dressed up, and it was adorable."

"Now we're lucky if the juniors stay through dinner at their prom," she sighed. "It's a thing of the past."

Lucy told me she thought the reason students didn't attend was because everyone would rather be home texting, Facebook messaging, or Snapchatting each other.

"Kids don't need to go to a dance to interact with each other when they can sit in their bed with their laptop and phone and text them," she said. "It's basically like being with that person. You don't have to show up to a dance hoping to see someone anymore. You can literally Snapchat them and see them on Snapchat."

But Kor said technology has always been a part of kids' lives, pointing out that when I was a student at John Jay, we used AOL Instant Messenger to communicate with each other while at home — the dominant method of virtual interaction in the late 90s and early 2000s.

But being home on a Friday night in 2000 meant we had a limited dial-up connection to the outside world. We didn't have personal phones, and the family desktop computer was likely located out in the open. We didn't have laptops we could hide with in our bedrooms. By default, computer use was supervised by the adults who shared the machine.

This is no longer the case.

With the advent of the smartphone, Kor says she has an additional responsibility, noting that recently a student had been caught trying to watch the live stream of the USA vs. Canada Olympic Hockey game on her phone during class. "My parents wouldn't let me stay home and watch the game," the senior explained when she got caught.

"Technology definitely allows the kids to find easier and faster ways to interact with one another," Kor admitted, "so maybe they don't feel like going to a school dance is a necessary way to socialize. But it's disappointing to watch the tradition fade."

John Jay isn't the only school experiencing the fall of the school dance. Kor told me she had spoken with several administrators at surrounding school districts in Westchester.

Out of the six she heard from, five of them were on par with John Jay High School: The only dance they hold each year is prom.

Geoff Nelson, a 10th and 11th grade English and History teacher in Locust Valley, New York, says the school he works at, Friend Academy, no longer has a tradition of dances, but it's not for lack of interest in dancing as an activity. "[Dancing] is more popular than ever," he says, citing the popular EDM (electronic dance music) craze that's rapidly gained traction with teens over the last few years.

Nelson says each generation finds its own way to rebel, suggesting that skipping the school dance is the new "brand of being 'cool' that means you must divorce yourself from the sanctioning of institutions."

In affluent, safe communities, teenagers have an abundance of things they could be doing when not confined within the walls of their schools. It's no surprise that the school gym isn't the first place they want to be on a Friday night.

But at schools for at-risk youth, school dances are still a saving grace for parents who want their kids under the watchful eye of school administrators for as much time as possible.

One such school, Broome Street Academy, has a few dances a year, usually held in the hallways right after the last bell rings. Teacher Katie McEvoy says about half of the student body attends, usually at the urge of the parents (or in many cases, foster parents).

"They usually stay in uniform," she adds, remembering that her favorite part of going to her high school dances was dressing up and going out later in the evening.

The decline of the high school dance feels like an unwritten chapter from Robert Putnam's 2000 book "Bowling Alone," an in-depth look at the social change in America at the approach of the millennium.

Putnam argued that while communities built around social or religious activities thrived in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, their bridge clubs and bowling leagues began to decline in the '90s, with no sign of a comeback. The statistic that haunts the book is Putnam's claim that in the 1990s, customers of bowling alleys were more likely to be bowling alone than in any decade prior.

"Kids today just aren't joiners," Putnam quotes Tom Kissell, the then-national membership director for the VFW, in 1999.

15 years later, it's the iconic school dance joining the list of things no longer rallied for.

What will be next? Football games? Movie premieres?

Going to dances decked out in fancy dresses and body glitter was proof that we were on the fast track to adulthood. Hanging out and socializing (read: in the same room) as seniors who could drive and vote was an experience underclassman craved; school dances were the way to get it.

Technology has allowed teenagers to be more independent, with greater access to one another — unsupervised by adults — than the students of decades past ever had.

So it's no surprise teenagers are much more selective when it comes to their real-life interactions. Whether those activities be parties or movies or trips to the mall, they can quickly become adult-free, unlike the school gym. Which is why texting has become far more exciting than anything a school dance can offer.